

COMRADES TRUE



Annie Thomas

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COMRADES TRUE

BY

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NEW YORK

F. M. BUCKLES & COMPANY

9 AND 11 EAST 16TH STREET

LONDON—CHATTO & WINDUS

1900

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F. M. BUCKLES & COMPANY

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COMRADES TRUE.

CHAPTER I.

ST. ERROL.

THE three were at breakfast in a garish little sitting-room in their lodgings in a street leading out of a dingy West Central square. They were all young, handsome, healthy, happy, and poor. Two of them were clerks in the Admiralty; the third was a fine fox terrier.

An open letter was on the table, and was continually being read by one or other of the two young men. It was from a lawyer, and contained the staggering intelligence that by the death of a distant cousin of his late father's, St. Errol (the younger of the two men) had inherited the title of Lord St. Errol and the property which went with it. It was also stated in the letter that his late lordship had appointed his successor guardian to his adopted child.

The young fellow who had been raised so abruptly from poverty to riches was bewildered but not elated.

"A chap ought to be prepared for a thing of this kind. It's like taking a cart-horse and entering him

for racing with thoroughbreds," he said resentfully, after another long look at the letter.

"Have you never heard that you were the heir-presumptive to—to this?" Stanley asked.

"No; knew nothing about it. My father and mother died when I was three years old, and my uncle, my mother's brother, brought me up and launched me. He died last year, and the only friends I have in the world are you—and Jock."

Jock's tail wagged approvingly. Solemnity had prevailed this day at the usually lively morning meal, and Jock had grown low-spirited. Now, at the loving mention of his name he kindled up, laid a friendly head against his master's knee, and gazed with ill-concealed anxiety at a scrap of bacon on his master's plate.

"You'll have more friends now than you can easily count, Lord St. Errol. Now I must be off to the office," Stanley said, laughing lightly, and jumping up as he spoke.

"So must I," said St. Errol.

"Nonsense, old boy! You have dozens of things to do. You have to get clothes, in the first place, and, by Jove! you'll have to look sharp, for the funeral is to-morrow, I see."

"Don't say anything about it to the other fellows," St. Errol pleaded.

"My dear boy, you forget that it will be in all the evening papers. You seem to forget that you and I are journalists, and are bound to supply such an interesting bit of news to those who have enabled us to have butter of sorts with our bread lately."

"You'll go down with me to-morrow, Stanley?"

"Yes, if you wish it. Pull yourself together, my

boy ; it's a sudden blow, I know, but a blow from good fortune is better than one from bad."

"I don't feel like myself. Last night we speculated as to whether we could run to a chicken and bottled ale for dinner this evening, and now——"

"You are Lord St. Errol, with ten thousand a year and a ward."

"Oh, I forgot that. I wonder whether the kid's a boy or a girl. What shall I do with it?"

"Get it a nurse and some Swiss milk and Mellin's Food and a bottle ; that's what my sister always does when she has babies."

"I say, Stanley, we can take our tour round the world now, and if it's a boy we will take it with us."

"Bottle, Mellin's Food, nurse, and all the accompaniments? Yes ; you can travel with those joys, my dear fellow, but I must stick to my work here. I haven't ten thousand a year, you must remember."

"But I have, and all that's mine is thine, laddie."

"I'm not going to let you pauperize me," Stanley said, laughing, but catching hold warmly of the young man's hand as he spoke. "Now I'm off. Good-bye, Jock ; you shall soon walk in silk attire—in other words, have endless rats to kill. I'll get leave for this afternoon and help you to prepare for your onerous duties, St. Errol."

"I'm glad the name and title go together. I'm glad I'm St. Errol still."

Stanley turned away quickly, whistling gaily, but there was a moisture in his eyes that was not caused by hay fever or the influenza fiend.

When he was gone St. Errol flung himself on to a slippery, hard horsehair sofa, and tried to rest and

think out the case. He could do neither. Presently he got up and looked at himself in a glass that had wavy lines across it—lines that elongated one feature and foreshortened another.

“I can’t see whether I’ve altered or not ; I’m dazed. Jock, come here. ‘If I be I, as I suppose I be, I’ve a little dog at home, and he’ll know me.’” He held his arms out, and Jock’s response was a bound into them and then a slobbering lick on his master’s face. “You’re just the same old fellow, anyhow,” St. Errol said contentedly ; and then he rang for his landlady, and broke the news, that was sad for her, gently.

“We’ve all been so ‘appy here, sir—my lord, I mean—that it seems bitter—that’s what it is—that Mr. Stanley and I should have to part with you and Jock. There never was a better dog nor a nicer gentleman in a house than Jock and you, sir—my lord, I mean—but your lordship must excuse me ; it’s all so new.”

“It’s all new to me, too, Mrs. Bingham, but I can’t help it, you know.”

“And the lady upstairs, she’ll feel it dreadful, I know. She hasn’t much amusement, and it does interest her so to watch you two gentlemen go in and out. And she’s that fond of Jock that she always has him up with her when you’re away, and I believe gives him half her dinner most days.”

“I didn’t know there was a lady upstairs.”

“Oh yes, my lord. She has been here six months—quite the lady, but not too well off. She’s a singer, and it’s beautiful to hear her—such a voice !”

“I’ve never heard her.”

“She never practises when you gentlemen are in, and she would be angry with me if she knew I was talking

about her now. She thinks you have gone to your office as usual, and so presently she'll begin to practise, and then you'll hear something like singing. Shall I leave the door open, my lord?"

"No, shut it," he said testily.

And the landlady, who had dunned him for a week's lodging money the night before, courtseyed humbly and went out of the room.

In the room above the sitting-room of the comrades three a woman was sitting reading. Now and again, as the voices reached her from the room below, she moved impatiently, and then she muttered:

"Why doesn't that boy go? I must have an hour's practice before I go to Devigne."

Impatient as she was inwardly, she made a pretty restful picture as she sat flung at ease in a big arm-chair that had a habit of slightly rocking through having lost one of its castors.

Superficial people said she "had a lovely voice, and was dark and refined-looking." People who were not superficial, and who looked below the surface, declared her to be "the sort of woman women dread, men fatally adore."

What was she like? Very much like the central figure in Leslie's charming picture called "School Revisited"—plaintively pretty, but yet with a good deal of power and force in her delicate frame and face; a woman who had been compelled to fight the battle of life early.

"He must have gone by this time," she said aloud, as she rose and opened the door and called "Jock! Jock!"

No response.

“What can have happened to the dog?” she said, and ran downstairs as she spoke.

She was met by Jock and Jock’s master.

“I thought you were gone, and Jock always comes to me when you are out,” she explained, with a little gasp.

“Happy Jock!” Lord St. Errol murmured, but she would not seem to hear him.

Mrs. Bingham arrived upon the scene, and to a certain extent saved the situation.

“His lordship is that fond of Jock that he must be grateful to you for all the notice you have taken of the dog,” Mrs. Clifford.”

“And for all the notice I shall take still,” Mrs Clifford answered, graciously bowing her head as she turned to go up to her own room.

St. Errol stood for a minute or two in the hall, then he called the landlady.

“Tell Mrs. Clifford that Mr. Stanley and I shall be out the whole day. Her practice must not be interfered with.”

“I have always said you were a real gentleman,” said Mrs. Bingham applaudingly.

But St. Errol was not listening to her. The words, “And for all the notice I shall take still,” spoken by the loveliest lips he had ever seen, were ringing in his ears.

Money is power. Tailors, outfitters, and others vied with one another in attending to his lordship’s esteemed orders so successfully that he was fully equipped for the fray when he started to attend the funeral of the late lord the next day. It was only a two hours’ run from town to Rose-in-Vale, the lovely little place where Lord St. Errol had died, but those two hours seemed

long to Stanley, who got tired of St. Errol's rhapsodies about Mrs. Clifford's eyes and lips and manner after about five minutes.

"She timed her appearance well. You come into your title and property at breakfast, and a couple of hours later the unsophisticated artless beauty is at your door caressing your dog," Stanley said at last, with a searching look at St. Errol.

"If you had only seen her you wouldn't sneer in that way."

"My dear St. Errol, I am not sneering, and I have seen her many times."

"Do you know her?" St. Errol asked, subduing with an effort the appearance of the interest he felt.

"Never spoke to her in my life. She's too pretty, proud, poor, and good for an impecunious fellow like myself to attempt to know, and you had better let the acquaintance which began with Jock on your doormat cease, old chap."

St. Errol's head went up a full inch, but he could not on this first day of his elevation cavil at anything his faithful friend said, so he gave a twist to the conversation by saying :

"Smithers tells me that Rose-in-Vale is only a small place, a recent fancy of my predecessor's. The cradle of our race is Errol Castle, up in Cheshire. A castle, and I the owner of it ! What times we'll have, Stanley !"

"Many a good time still, I hope, but you mustn't wax fat and well-living. I hope you will go on working at the book ; you were so proud of the opening chapter of that novel the day before yesterday. Don't let it cease to interest you because your point of view of life has changed."

“I’ll write it, never fear.”

“And get it published on its own merits. Don’t stick your title on the title-page. I’ll negotiate all the business for you, and we’ll see ‘Dalma’ soar into success without any adventitious aids. Where did you get the name, by the way?”

“She sang at a concert at the Imperial Institute the other night, and the name struck me. By Jove! something else strikes me now, Stanley. Mrs. Clifford is Dalma. I thought I had seen her face in a vision before when I met her this morning!”

“There are too many coincidences knocking about. Hallo! we are at our station, I suppose? What a neat, trim, little place!”

“Clayton! Change here for Rose-in-Vale!” a porter cried out, and in another minute a smart footman was piloting the two young men to an equally smart brougham, drawn by a pair of bays whose breeding, quality, and condition made them fit for any show-yard.

There was a good representative show of the aristocracy and gentry of the county. Lord St. Errol had not been popular while he lived, but the neighborhood canceled its ill-feeling now, and prepared to give a warm welcome to the coming man. Everyone said he “deported himself extremely well through what must have been a trying ordeal. As a matter of fact, St. Errol did not feel the ordeal “trying,” except in so far as it was a detaining ceremony. He was impatient to fulfil all the duties that had just devolved upon him—all the temporary duties, that is—in order that he might get back to town and see Jock—and perhaps Mrs. Clifford?

The thought of that fascinatingly pretty woman haunted him. How could she have lived under the same roof with him for six months without his having even a dim glimmering notion that she was there? And all the time she had been petting and feeding Jock without a thought of Jock's master!

The service was over, and the two young men were driving back to Rose-in-Vale. It was in the boyhood of the year. Spring was revelling in the display of her fresh beauties at Rose-in-Vale. As they drove through the entrance-gates, hundreds of varieties of the daffodil and narcissus tribes, stretching out in their golden and white splendor on well-kept and shaded, sloping lawns, burst upon their view. Laburnums and acacias dropped their yellow, rose and white petals around them as they passed up the drive.

"Your lines have fallen in pleasant places, dear old boy," Stanley said, as the brougham drew up at the entrance to a house that was sweetly quaint in itself, but was simply delicious now with its veranda and balcony wreathed with wisteria and Japanese honeysuckle. "Your lines have fallen in pleasant places. You've been a good chap through years of poverty. Be a better one now that you'll have the handling of riches."

"I'll begin by having a look at the kid, and then we'll discuss what we will do with it," St. Errol said.

He was too much overcome by his changed prospects to bear any reference to them, either cruel or kind. He found himself consulted by the butler as to what hour he would dine, and while he was laughing to himself at the remembrance of the way Stanley and he had canvassed the possibility of running to roast chicken and

bottled beer for this very night only the day before, he felt rather dazed. Other bewildering servants were waiting for orders which he did not want to give. He heartily wished himself back with—Jock !

As he and Stanley stood in the entrance-hall among a group of well-trained servants who did not turn a hair in all the confusion, a neat little page pushed his way to the front. For an instant he hesitated as to which he should address. Then intuition came to his aid. "They both may be lords, but this is *our* lord," he thought, and forthwith addressed St. Errol with the words :

"If your lordship will come this way, Miss St. Errol will see you at once, my lord."

"Come this way, Stanley," St. Errol said, with something like a groan, and they both followed the page into a room. "This must be a sister of the poor old chap's. I didn't reckon on having to deal with a maiden tenth cousin."

The room into which they had come was merely an anteroom, but was the most exquisitely furnished and decorated living-place either of the men had ever seen. The panels of the walls were enamelled white, with fine outlines of green, and the green and white chintze furniture carried out the delicate note of color struck by the walls. The many little tables supported innumerable bowls and baskets of white daffodils, syringa, white lilac, and lilies of the valley, all plentifully interspersed with their own fresh green foliage. All these details they noticed as they passed quickly through them between wide folding doors into a far more splendid and spacious saloon.

As they advanced, a lady in deepest mourning rose

and came slowly forward to meet them, while they paused abruptly in amazement : for though the light was low in the saloon, they could see the lady distinctly enough to feel sure that she could not be a maiden sister of the late old lord's.

CHAPTER II.

THE WARD.

SHE was quite a young girl, and, in spite of the cloud of sorrow which was darkening her face, they saw that she was a beautiful one. As St. Errol involuntarily stepped ahead of Stanley, she held her hand out to him with the words :

“You are Lord St. Errol, I am sure.”

“I am,” he said, bowing very low over her hand, “and you are——”

“Your ward—Stella ‘St. Errol,’ poor papa used to call me. But that is not my real name, and he was not my papa really. And you are my guardian? How very funny!”

“I shall strive to prove true to my trust,” he said so gravely that she began to laugh.

“I expected to see an old man, as old as papa, walk in. Papa always seemed to think his successor would be old. I have been so dreadfully afraid that the new Lord St. Errol would have a disagreeable wife and daughters who would want to turn me out.”

“Well, I have neither a disagreeable wife nor daughters, and if I had——”

She began to laugh again as she said :

"I should think not ! Fancy you with a wife."

St. Errol felt momentarily offended, and in that moment remembered Stanley's presence.

"Let me introduce my friend—my greatest friend, Mr. Stanley—to you, Miss St. Errol," he said ; and the girl recovered her gravity and dignity in a moment as she welcomed her guardian's friend.

"Well, come and have some luncheon now. If the guardian had been old, with a horrid wife, he would have lunched with Mr. Smithers alone ; but now——"

She did not say what would happen "now," but led the way through a suite of rooms that were of fairy-like beauty in the eyes of the young men to a deliciously cool dining-room, where they found Mr. Smithers and a feast fit for the gods awaiting them.

For a minute or two Stella was silent. She was thinking that the last time she had sat at that table it had been with the "papa" who had taken her to be his child, and had lavished every luxury that money and love could procure upon her. Suddenly she roused herself. These sudden changes were part of her bewitching personality, and fixing her deep blue eyes solemnly on Stanley, asked him :

"Are you going to live here, too ?"

"I ? No, certainly not ; I'm only a clerk in the Admiralty Office," he said in some confusion.

"I wish you were," she said frankly ; "it is so nice to sit down to a meal with two or three people. Do you know, in all my life I have never sat down with anyone but papa and Mr. Smithers."

"His late lordship did not enjoy good health, and had a great aversion to society," Mr. Smithers explained hastily, while the two young men looked with

compassionate admiration on the lovely girl who had been condemned to such a dull existence.

“We will alter all that now,” St. Errol said, looking at her kindly with his sparkling hazel eyes. “We have led a dull life, too, haven’t we, Stanley? You and I both know what hard work and dulness means, don’t we?”

“The work is hard enough, but it saves us from dulness,” Stanley corrected.

The deep blue eye roved solemnly from the one to the other face of the two last speakers, and while her attention was given to St. Errol, Stanley had time to observe the willowy grace of her tall, slender figure, and the exquisite flower-like face and golden-haired little head that crowned it.

“Refined and aristocratic from top of her head to the tips of her toes. Wherever his lordship picked her up, she’s a lady born as well as bred. Poor girl!”

“I have never been to a dance or a dinner, or had a ball-dress,” the girl was telling St. Errol vivaciously; and then the corners of her mouth drooped despondently as she added: “And now, I suppose, I never shall.”

“That you shall; I’ll see to that.”

St. Errol, as he spoke, tried to think if he knew any woman who might possibly take Stella into society. There was his chief’s wife, to be sure! She often good-naturedly tried to enliven his and Stanley’s Sunday by asking them to dinner at her house in Clapham. She was a good-natured woman, and she had a brougham; no one who knew her could ever forget this latter fact. But, in spite of the good nature and

the brougham, he felt, as he glanced at his ward, that his chief's wife would be useless.

"I must talk to Smithers about it," he told himself; but he knew that Smithers would be useless in a case of this kind. Then his thoughts wandered back to Jock—and Dalma! "*What* a friend she could be to Stella, if only I can bring them together!" he thought; and he pictured vividly to himself how, probably at this very hour, Mrs. Clifford was giving Jock some dinner. "He's a lucky dog to be with her. Dear old Jock! he deserves all the luck he gets——"

"It is only necessary that your lordship and the two executors should be present at the reading of the will. You are the sole relative of the late lord present, and—I will trouble your lordship to come with me to the library. The formalities will be quickly got over," Mr. Smithers was droning out in his best professional voice, which was utterly unlike his society one.

As they all rose from the table Stella's voice was heard. They looked at her. Every trace of color had left her, with the exception of the golden hair and the deep blue eyes. Even her lips were white.

"The will! Is the will to be read now? Oh, perhaps it will tell me, tell every one, who I am!"

She flashed out of the room before any one could answer her, and the eyes and the hearts of the two young men followed her.

"Your ward is a nice young lady, but you'll find her a handful, my lord," Mr. Smithers said confidentially; and St. Errol asked eagerly:

"Who is she? Tell me—you know."

"I can tell you nothing beyond this—she is his late lordship's adopted child, and your ward."

“ You mean that you *will* tell me nothing more ? ”

“ Your lordship is right,” said the lawyer. “ I cannot and I will not.”

The two executors appointed by the late Lord St. Errol were a couple of gentleman farmers—yeomen, in fact—who knew nothing of his lordship or his lordship’s affairs beyond this : that he had bought Rose-in-Vale, and given them the right to shoot, course, and fish over the property. They were rather disposed to feel hostile towards his successor until they were assured that he intended to still cede them those rights. However, they were genial and hearty to him when he went into the library, and before the business which had brought them together was concluded, they pronounced him “ a right good fellow, with no nonsense about him.”

While that business was proceeding, Stella took Stanley for a stroll through the gardens, and he found himself wishing that the “ business ” would last for many hours.

Here was virgin soil indeed. I am not speaking of the gardens—all that art and culture could do had been done for them—but the girl knew as little of the world as when she was born into it. Her only acquaintances of her own sex had been her many governesses. Lord St. Errol had never retained the services of any one of them, however proficient, for more than twelve months, and the only man she had ever spoken to until this day beside Lord St. Errol was Mr. Smithers. It was a wonderful experience for her to be walking about the gardens, that had been gilded cages to her hitherto, with a young, handsome fellow-creature who lived in London and had been to the theaters, of which she had only read.

"I know nothing, nothing, *nothing* of life beyond the fact that I am living. I know nothing of the world besides this: that Rose-in-Vale is a lovely place and Errol Castle a stately one. You must find me very dull after the great London ladies to whom you are accustomed. I read about them in the *World* and the *Queen*. Papa took those papers for me. But whenever I said I should like to wear the dresses and jewels described in them, he used to laugh, and say it was all vanity."

"I know no great London ladies. You are the greatest lady I ever knew or ever wish to know. The beautiful dresses and jewels will be yours, very soon, I am sure."

Stanley tried his hardest to speak in a grandfatherly way, but it was difficult work with those lovely deep-blue eyes reading him so attentively. His heart was filled with pity for this beautiful, desolate young creature, who had no friend in the world with the exception of dear, good-hearted, attractive, utterly irresponsible St. Errol.

Stella gave him a grateful, upsetting smile.

"How nice of you to say that, because you are his greatest friend! He said so himself, and so you must know what he intends to do with me. Tell me, will you?"

"Fall in love with you," Stanley would have said if he had spoken from his heart. As it was, he spoke from his head, and said: "We must find a very, very delightful elderly lady to take charge of you, travel with you, and teach you the ways of the world, of which you know so little. When that is done, the rest will arrange itself."

The blue eyes lost all their solemnity, and sparkled with delight.

“ Oh, oh, it’s like a dream—a lovely dream ! I shan’t wake from it, shall I ? ”

“ Not for a long time, I hope, Miss St. Errol. ”

He was still grandfatherly.

“ I am so glad you said, ‘ *We* must find a delightful elderly lady.’ Are you joint guardian with Lord St. Errol ? ”

“ I have not the honor to be that,” he said stiffly, and from being elderly he became aged.

“ I don’t want her to be so very old, you know,” the girl said musingly. “ Most of my governesses have been that. If they walked a mile they got stiff or tired, and not one of them could ride. Now, do you know, I don’t think much of any one who can’t ride ? ”

Miss St. Errol spoke confidentially and as if she were perfectly sure of his sympathy in the matter.

With humiliation he reflected that he had only once been on a horse, and the horse and he had parted unceremoniously. St. Errol had the advantage of him in this respect. St. Errol had taken lessons in a riding-school, and could sit a jump. In response to her last remark, he found himself saying meanly :

“ It’s easy enough to ride if you can afford to have the horses. ”

She gazed at him fixedly, read his thoughts, and knew that she had wounded him, and in a moment made amends.

“ So it is. It shows what an ignorant goose I am, to have left that question out of consideration. Now, will you like to come and see my mare and the cobs I drive,

or shall we go in and hear if they have finished with that will business?"

"We'll go to the stables if you will kindly take me," he said.

The time would come, all too soon, when he would have to part from her "forever." How awful those words are in the ears of loving youth! But he could not bring himself to resign her to general society just yet, so he elected to go to the stables, though he was as ignorant of the manners, customs, points, and quality of the horses as a Choktaw Indian is of the habits of Mayfair.

The stables were well filled with good horseflesh. Each one would have been a winner in the class for which it had been entered had the late Lord St. Errol consented to show. But this he had never done. He had kept his horses as he had kept himself and his adopted child—apart from the common crowd.

"These are my cobs, Gaylass and Gaylad," she said, pointing out a pair of gray beauties standing in adjacent stalls. "And this is my mare Guinevere," she added, opening the door of a loose-box and bestowing what Stanley thought were foolish caresses on the head of a quivering piece of chestnut satin who came to meet Stella with a little neigh of gladness.

"Papa gave her to me when she was two years old; now she's five off, and no one has ever ridden her but myself; but if you would like to try her I'll lend her to you," Stella said winningly.

And Stanley felt himself to be a surly brute as he answered:

"Thanks, but I don't ride, and if I did I wouldn't ride a borrowed horse."

Stella sighed.

"I meant—I thought—I wished you to try her," she said softly.

Then she bestowed a parting kiss on the mare's nose, and asked Stanley if he would like to see the kennels.

He assented, adding that he was very fond of dogs.

"Have you a dog?" she asked.

"St. Errol has a dear old chap, a fox terrier. He is the cleverest beastie I think that ever lived; he really does everything but speak."

"Do you know, Lord St. Errol is just what I think Marmion must have been like?" she said, turning with rapidity from the subject of the dog to that of the dog's master.

"I'm sorry for that," Stanley said coldly.

"Are you? Why?"

"Because—pardon me for saying it—Marmion was a heartless scoundrel."

"No, no, no!" Stella said, in quick vindication of one of her many disreputable favorites in fiction; "he wasn't heartless. A number of things proved that he wasn't *that*. I've always felt sorry for him," she went on pensively—"as sorry as if he had been real."

"I'll admit that there must have been some redeeming trait in him, otherwise you would not take an interest in his character," Stanley compelled himself to say apologetically.

She shook her head.

"Ah, I'm afraid when I know a lot of people I shall always like the bad ones best," she said sadly. "You see," she resumed, with a rapid return to mirth, "my governesses have all been so good and so dull, and Mr.

Smithers is good, I know, because papa used to tell me what an excellent man Smithers was ; but he's worse than being alone—oh, ever so much worse ! Are you good or excellent ? ”

“ I can't lay claim to being either. I'm very inferior clay, I fear.”

“ I'm glad of that,” she said joyously. “ Now let us go to the dogs.”

Stanley was in a congenial atmosphere in the kennels, for, as he had said, he “ loved dogs,” and, moreover, in addition to loving, he knew something about them. The enormous head and general burglar-like appearance of Stella's pet bulldog, Adonis, appealed to him strongly, so did the graceful beauty of her grayhound, Countess, but most of all his heart went out to a grand St. Bernard, Alp, the king of the kennels.

“ Do you think he will let me keep him ? ” she asked wistfully ; “ I am so fond of them. Do you think he will let me keep them ? ”

“ My dear Miss St. Errol, your guardian would be heart-broken if he thought you doubted that for a moment.”

“ I won't break his heart about it, then ; I will rely on him—of *course* I will rely on him—for whatever you say about him must be true. Do you think he will like me ? Papa loved me so much that I couldn't bear not to be liked by my guardian—and you.”

Stanley's blood tingled in his veins.

“ Of course he will like you,” he said coolly.

“ Why don't you say ‘ Of course we shall like you ? ’ ” she asked impatiently ; then, relapsing into tenderness she added : “ I can't disconnect you two in my mind ; you are such friends—such dear friends. I know that

if you don't like me he won't, and if you do like me he will, too. Tell me, which is it to be?"

"I like you," was all he constrained himself to say, and in an instant she was a happy, laughing girl, holding a retriever puppy up for him to kiss.

While he was performing this little act of obedience they heard voices in the near distance. The retriever was dropped so hurriedly as to be made uncomfortable for a few moments, and the face of the girl who had held him was flooded with joy.

"He is coming," she said: "let us go and meet him."

"He has become 'he' to her already. What a fool I am!" Stanley thought, but he only said: "Do you mean Smithers? I heard his voice."

"No," she replied, looking back at him over her shoulder; "I mean Marmion!"

"This day's work has been bad for me; how will it be for St. Errol?" Stanley asked himself as he followed the figure of the sylph who was flying to meet St. Errol. "Why did I come down? Why don't I go back by the next train? Why am I an ass?"

"Everything is as right as rain," St. Errol said cheerfully, as Stanley, looking rather sulky, joined the group. "All we have to do now is to get some well-connected old dowager to take charge of my ward"—he looked at Stella, and his eyes laughed—"and we'll travel, old chap, as war correspondents, and that Monte Carlo novel that we have been talking about for months shall be written."

"What a thoughtless boy he is!" Stanley thought, as he said: "You can do these things, but I can't."

In a moment Stella stood between them, grasping a hand of each one, and bringing them together.

"Whatever one of you does the other must do, or I shall be so unhappy," she said plaintively. "How can you talk of leaving me with an old dowager, while you travel? You said you liked me"—she glanced resentfully at Stanley—"and that he would like me, too. And now you speak of going away and leaving me as I wouldn't leave a horse or a dog. How could you? How *could* you? I have never had a friend—a young friend—before I met you to-day, and I won't be left with an old frump; I won't part with you!"

"Whatever you like to do shall be done," St. Errol said cordially.

"Whatever is expedient for you shall be done," Mr. Smithers said cautiously.

"I shall like to do what I like better than what is expedient for me," Stella laughed out gaily. "And you'll let me do what I like, won't you?"

She looked from St. Errol to Stanley quickly as she spoke, but only St. Errol answered her.

"*That* I promise you," her judicious young guardian said eagerly; but Stanley said nothing, and Stella felt vaguely disappointed.

"Now, tell me: is anything said about who I am in the will?" she asked; and her face fell, and tears came into her blue eyes, when Mr. Smithers told her.

"Nothing beyond this, that you are spoken of as his late lordship's adopted child, that he leaves you four hundred a year, and charges his successor with the guardianship of you until you marry."

"Fancy me married!" she laughed out. "Wouldn't it be funny?"

Stanley seemed about to say something, but he checked himself; while St. Errol told her she "must

choose a right good fellow, for she would have plenty to choose from."

"What shall we do to-morrow?" she questioned. Her busy brain was always at work making plans. "Shall we go for a long drive with my cobs?"

"We must go back to town to-morrow," St. Errol told her.

"Then I'll go with you. I won't be left alone here! It would be worse than ever, now I know you two."

"My dear girl, you can't," her guardian said earnestly. "We have nowhere to take you."

"If I may be permitted to make a suggestion," Mr. Smithers said, "I can answer for Mrs. Smithers that she would be delighted to have Miss St. Errol as a guest until such time as a suitable chaperon for her can be found."

"A capital idea!" said St. Errol.

"A lovely one!" said Stella, in an ecstasy of delight; and she looked at Stanley, who still kept silence. "Why won't you say you're glad? Just now you said you liked me, and now you're not a bit glad that I am going up with you."

The young flirt knew her power, and already loved to exert it.

"If you are glad to go, I am, of course, glad you are going," Stanley forced himself to say.

"But you are not glad for yourself that I am going?" she persisted. "That's very, very unkind of you. You are pleased, are you not?"

She laid a slim white hand on St. Errol's arm as she spoke, and a pang of bitter envy shot through Stanley's heart.

"Glad, rather! You'll find me a very stern guardian

when I get you up to town. As Robert Brough wrote in a charming little poem called 'Neighbor Nellie':

"A suspicious cankered churl,
I look vainly for the setting to be worthy such a pearl."

"I know 'Neighbor Nellie'; they are a lovely little set of verses. But I won't let you be stern to me about *anything*."

St. Errol laughed at the idea of any one "being stern to such a dainty bit of humanity," and his words gave Stella an opportunity of having another little thrust at Stanley.

"You could be very stern with me, couldn't you?" she asked innocently.

"I don't know. If you ever deserved sternness I should be stern," he said curtly.

"Ah, you might try to be, but you wouldn't keep it up long, for I should be good, and do whatever you wanted directly."

"In fact, you would try to cajole me."

For the life he could not help speaking in grim seriousness, instead of treating the topic jestingly, as the others were doing.

"I must go and tell my maid to begin packing all my things at once. Poor thing! she will be as glad to go to London as I am. She has had a hard time of it here," she added, shaking the small, well-shaped head, round which the undulating golden hair was closely bound. "The butler wanted to marry her, and the footman wanted to marry her; and as she couldn't marry both, she wouldn't marry either, for fear they should fight. Then they got disagreeable to her, though she

had done it all out of kindness. Wasn't it nasty of them ? ”

“ Very,” all three men assented ; and then the young beauty told them they “ must do without her until eight o'clock, when they would meet at dinner.”

“ I shall have tea in my own room. I'm sure you none of you care for tea ? Papa didn't. He used to have what he called “ a peg ” instead. *Au revoir* ; ” and she was off before they could answer her.

“ Your ward is a very interesting but rather erratic young lady,” Mr. Smithers said, as she disappeared.

“ I am very proud of her already,” St. Errol answered ; “ and I'm more than grateful to you for helping me out of a difficulty, and offering her a home in your house until we can find a suitable chaperon for her. We couldn't have left her here, could we, Stanley ? ”

“ You couldn't, but I, being in no way responsible for her, could.”

“ She ought to make a splendid marriage if she is well brought out,” Mr. Smithers said. “ If she could be presented at one of the later Drawing-rooms, she would make a sensation.”

“ Who's to present her ? I don't know any swells,” St. Errol said hopefully.

“ You'll know any number of them very soon, my lord. Meantime, I will try to work something for her through some of my titled clients,” Mr. Smithers promised.

“ All right. Now, Stanley, come and have a pipe and a chat over the next chapter of ‘ Dalma.’ ”

“ ‘ Dalma ’ has not been effaced from your mind yet, then ? ”

"She never will be," St. Errol declared enthusiastically.

"I was speaking of the book, not the woman," Stanley said contemptuously.

"And I was thinking of both," said St. Errol blithely.

The journey up to town was a lively and pleasant one for them all. Stella divided her attentions—her flashes of mirth, her moments of sadness, her ever-varying moods—equally between the two men. All went well until they reached the London terminus, when Stella flashed out a statement of intention that staggered all three men, and made them profoundly uncomfortable. She was already proving herself "the handful" Mr. Smithers had prophesied that her guardian would find her.

CHAPTER III.

MISS ST. ERROL'S WHIM.

STELLA was standing on the platform between St. Errol and Stanley, and surrounded by her maid and her luggage, while Mr. Smithers was looking for his brougham, which had been sent to meet his fair young guest and himself, when the young lady in question gave them her prearranged shock.

"Before I go to Mrs. Smithers," she said sweetly, "I mean to go with you two to your lodgings. I want to see Jock."

"My dear young lady, impossible!" Mr. Smithers protested. "I have an important engagement which I cannot on any account miss, so I *cannot* take you to—to—a—see Jock."

"You needn't come. I can go with them," she said, airily waving her hand towards the two young men.

"You *can't* come, really," St. Errol pleaded.

"You *shall* not come," Stanley said, more firmly.

"Now you're stern," she said coaxingly. "Oh, please don't be stern about such a little thing."

"I can't take you there, I tell you," Mr. Smithers said irritably.

His time was of immense value to himself and an extravagant wife. He could not waste it on the whim of a spoilt child.

"I shall go with *them*. I don't want you, but I mean to go; and if Mr. Stanley looks cross, I'll go with my guardian alone. But go I will. You can take my maid and the luggage," she continued affably to Mr. Smithers, "and they will bring me to your house when I've seen their lodgings and Jock."

"By *they* I presume you mean your guardian and Mr. Stanley?"

She nodded a bright assent.

"Lord St. Errol has already told you that he will not take you. You are merely wasting time," Mr. Smithers said, more irritably still.

Stella turned to Lord St. Errol with tears in her eyes.

"Don't be unkind to me," she pleaded; "if you are, I shall feel that I haven't a friend in the world."

Lord St. Errol visibly wavered.

"Wasting time in this way is ridiculous, simply absurd!" Mr. Smithers grumbled. "I *must* be off. Delay in my case to-day is destructive both to my clients and myself."

"Go—*do* go, then," Stella said, more sweetly than ever. Then she told her maid to "unpack and have everything ready for me when I get to Mrs. Smithers." "I suppose I can be there in an hour?" she added to Mr. Smithers.

He grunted an affirmative.

"That's right. Now come on," she said brightly, laying her hand on St. Errol's arm as she spoke.

Stanley felt a sharp twinge of pain as she did so. He remembered that only the day before she had used exactly the same gesture towards himself.

"If you will you will, I suppose," St. Errol said good-

temperedly, and forthwith ordered a cab. "We must make the best of it, Stanley ; come on," he said, with a deprecating laugh.

"You are weak," Stanley muttered.

Nevertheless, he followed the wilful beauty and her weak guardian into a cab.

"This is nice and comfortable," Stella said, as she snuggled into a corner. "None of my governesses ever let me do as I liked except one, and papa sent her away the day after she came. She was a dear ! What a lovely place London is !"

As they were driving through some of the by-streets that lead from Charing Cross Station to Oxford Street as she spoke, it must be admitted that the tenderly-cherished and luxuriously-brought-up Stella was easily pleased.

They soon came to the very unpretentious lodgings in which the hard-working Admiralty clerks had spent so many happy days, days that were over now for both of them in widely different ways. The door was opened with the latch-key in an instant, Stella was in the passage in another, and as the two young men entered they stood aghast at the spectacle of Mrs. Clifford with Jock in her arms, and Stella with her arms round Mrs. Clifford's neck.

"I *would* come," Stella began, before any one else could speak. "I wanted to see Jock. I didn't know you were here ; they didn't tell me that. I'm glad I came—I'm so glad. I would come. Tell me everything about yourself. Aren't you glad to see me ?"

Mrs. Clifford had dropped Jock, who was divided between his joy at seeing his master back and his annoyance at being dropped by any one. It seemed to

the two men that it was with almost a motherly tenderness that she drew Stella towards her and kissed her warmly.

"Dear Stella, I little thought I should ever see you again. Glad to see you? Of course I am! Who that has ever seen you once would not be glad to see you again? But what brought you here if it was not to see me?"

"My own will and a cab." Stella spoke as if there was something very laudable in having exerted the former. "You must live with me now. When papa sent you away I had a quarrel with him. We had never quarreled before, but when he sent you away I was in a fury."

"I quite believe it," Stanley said quietly.

She flashed a sunny smile at him.

"Hadn't you ladies better come into our digs? Miss St. Errol wished to see Jock," he explained to Mrs. Clifford.

And St. Errol, who was only glad to have a chance of getting another word with Mrs. Clifford under any circumstances, warmly seconded the invitation.

Jock was introduced to his fair visitor by Stanley, and while the three were engaged in an animated verbal fight at close quarters as to the merits and demerits of various breeds of dogs, St. Errol seized the opportunity of getting a few words with the woman who had been constantly in his thoughts since first he saw her three days ago.

"It is delightful to me that you should already know the home that is mine now," he began.

Her lovely creamy-complexioned face flushed ever so slightly.

“I thank you so much.” She raised the sweetest eyes that were ever seen to his as she spoke—eyes that perplexed the cleverest colorists to define whether they were gray, or blue, or purple, for they changed their tints with each change in her sensitive nature. “You must remember,” she went on, “that mine was not a pleasant visit to Rose-in-Vale. The place is lovely, but the only happy association I have with it is that dear girl over there, who risked the favor of the late Lord St. Errol by fighting for me.”

All the bright, boyish carelessness fled from his handsome face as he listened, and it was a strong, determined man who replied :

“Trust me to repair the wrong done to you by my boorish predecessor.”

“He was not ‘boorish ;’ that’s the odd part of it. He must have hated me for some reason to account both for his action and his words.”

“You shall carry away happier memories of your next visit to Rose-in-Vale ; I will see to that.”

“I always knew he was a dear boy,” she thought ; then her eyes clouded to their deepest hue as she remembered the disparity in their positions, and the impossibility of this “dear boy” ever being more to her than he was to-day. “Stella is beyond the age to require a governess now,” she said.

“But not beyond the age to require a friend, and you will be that friend to her, won’t you ? You will see her often, constantly, won’t you ?”

Again he was the eager, impassioned boy, pleading for a favor from the woman who was the first to stir his heart’s depths. Yes, come what may, Mrs. Clifford was St. Errol’s first love.

She shook her head, and tried to meet his ardent gaze steadily as she answered :

"Often, I hope. But I am a worker—you little know how hard a one—and she is, or will be, a great lady. You only know me as 'Mrs. Clifford,' but I am also——"

"Dalma," he interrupted.

"How do you know it?"

"I heard you sing once at the Imperial Institute, then I saw you here three days ago—do you remember?—and going in the train the day before yesterday I put the two together, and it was *you*."

Meanwhile Jock had proved a very engrossing theme. He sat on Stella's lap, and alternately offered a friendly paw to her and to Stanley. Miss St. Errol made Jock sit up and "beg Mr. Stanley's pardon for her having come there without leave." When that little performance had been gone through, Stanley dragged himself out of his fool's paradise and recalled his sense of right.

"St. Errol," he called out, "you must remember how anxious Mr. and Mrs. Smithers must be about Miss St. Errol; we must take her home at once."

"Oh, there's no hurry," St. Errol was beginning, when Mrs. Clifford rose up, and with the words, "I have a lesson to take; I must not keep my master waiting," took leave of them all.

"I shall come again to-morrow; I won't leave you again," Stella cried out after her.

And Stanley felt that Mrs. Clifford was a woman more to be envied than a royal Princess, while St. Errol blessed his ward for proposing to become a link between himself and the woman who so thrilled him.

“Now say that you’re glad I would come,” Stella said to her guardian as they drove towards the Bayswater square in which Mr. Smithers’ house was situated. “If I hadn’t gone I should never have met Mrs. Clifford again.”

“I am glad you came, Stella. Mrs. Clifford is just the sort of woman I should like you to be very intimate with,” St. Errol said so eagerly that Stanley put in :

“You know such a lot about her, don’t you ?”

“At any rate, *I* know a lot about her,” Stella put in hotly. “She told me all about herself the few hours she was at Rose-in-Vale.”

Stanley regretted having spoken.

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. SMITHERS.

"HERE we are at Smithers'," Lord St. Errol said, as the cab drew up at the door of a large house in a large square in Bayswater.

"I believe you're afraid to go in," Stella said gleefully.

"I am, because Mrs. Smithers may be a bit annoyed with you," St. Errol replied.

"That won't matter in the least now that I have seen dear Mrs. Clifford. I can go to her when I like."

"My dear child, you can't be running about by yourself in London," her guardian said seriously.

"Very well, then, stay and run about with me. That would be ever so much nicer."

"Deuce of a time they are opening the door," Stanley put in sulkily.

He was vaguely annoyed at the turn the conversation was taking, and so vented his displeasure on the unconscious Smithers.

At that moment the door was opened by a butler of irreproachable manners and appearance, while an equally irreproachable footman came to open the cab door. In a minute Lord St. Errol and his ward were entering a fine, lofty drawing-room that spelt "Maple's latest"

from carpet to ceiling, and a fine, lofty dame was advancing to meet them.

"You must pardon——" St. Errol was beginning, but she held up a plump, well-ringed hand and stopped him.

"There is nothing to pardon, Lord St. Errol. Mr. Smithers made an absurd fuss about nothing. I am delighted to see you, Miss St. Errol, and I hope you will have nothing but good words to say of me when your guardian takes you from under my charge. I am delighted to see you."

And so, in truth, she was, for independently of her desire to mix on terms of social equality with her husband's aristocratic clients, she really took pleasure in having young and pretty girls about her. And Stella was a lovely one.

She was a large-featured, good-looking woman of the robust order. Her eyes and hair were nut-brown, the former a trifle hard and defiant, the latter beautifully done. If her throat had been longer, her figure less coarsely developed, and the costume she wore over it not quite so tight, she would have been a handsome one. As it was, "she looks good-natured," Stella thought, and determined to make that good nature subservient to her own sweet will.

"Have you lunched?" Mrs. Smithers inquired presently. "I know you left Rose-in-Vale quite early; let me offer——"

"I couldn't touch anything," Stella interrupted vehemently. "I want to go for a drive to see the parks and shops."

"And I must say good morning, Mrs. Smithers. Good-by for to-day, Stella; don't give so much trouble

as to oblige Mrs. Smithers to send for me to scold you."

"I shall be over at your lodgings to-morrow to see Mrs. Clifford," she replied.

And as he went away laughing and saying, "No, no, Stella!" she gave him a parting shot:

"Yes, I shall, Marmion."

"What does she mean by that?" St. Errol asked himself, and when he rejoined Stanley he repeated the question to his friend.

"I don't know; the girl is full of fancies. She informed me that Marmion was one of her favorite heroes in fiction, and that you were like him. I said I was sorry for you. What are you going to do to-night?"

"We'll dine at Prince's first, and then go and hear Dalma sing."

"You're getting on. When shall you leave town?"

"At the end of the season. I have to look out for Stella, you must remember."

"I don't forget, but you have other duties and responsibilities."

"You must admit that Stella is the first of these—at present."

"So I suppose it will be Stella in the morning and Dalma in the evening?" Stanley said, with a touch of jealousy.

"And *you* always, old boy," St. Errol rejoined heartily.

"What is Mrs. Smithers like?" Stanley asked, more from a desire to turn the conversation than from any thirst for information on the subject of that lady.

"Loud, good-looking, vain, and a little bit vulgar—

the sort of woman who makes you feel she is thinking 'I'm as good as any one' all the time."

"Then, St. Errol, your ward, who is the essence of refinement and caprice, won't have a very happy time with her."

"Oh, she'll be all right. Mrs. Smithers is good-natured, I am sure of that, and Stella will take charge in no time."

"As she has done of you already," Stanely said dryly.

St. Errol looked up quickly and laughed, then shook his head, and said :

"She might have done so four days ago, my friend, but not now."

Stanley shrugged his shoulders, and the subject dropped.

Dalma sang that night at one of the smaller concert-halls, but it was a good place for sound, and as soon as she came on she resolved to outdo all her former triumphs. She did not see our two friends, who were nearly in front-seats. But notwithstanding this, she felt as soon as she stepped on the platform that they were in the house. Her heart was beating almost audibly. The whole of her lovely frame was trembling with an emotion she had never felt before. But for all that there was not a tremor in the splendid voice as it rang out in the opening bars of "Mia Piccarella."

St. Errol was not a musical man. Hitherto concerts had bored him ; but now his heart told him that the woman he loved was singing this delicious love-song most divinely. At its conclusion his reason seconded his heart, for Dalma was encored to the echo, and amidst the thunders of applause she heard his voice distinctly.

She would not take her encore, nor would she look at St. Errol. But he knew that she was conscious of his presence, and that knowledge satisfied him. The rest of the concert was a dreary waste of time to him. He heard nothing. He wondered how any one could have the patience to sit there and listen to any one else but Dalma. When she came on again in her white satin dress covered with a thick network of jet, he felt jealous that any other eyes than his own should behold her. Then immediately a magnificent bouquet of white orchids, lilies of the valley, and maidenhair was handed to her by the leader of the orchestra ; and though she would not look at him, St. Errol felt that she knew it was his gift, his tribute.

This time it was an English song. A week ago he would have pronounced the words to be "the merest piffle." This night, when that brilliant voice of hers rang out the invitation "Come out, come out, my dearest dear," he felt for the first time the beauty of the English language and of melody.

Again she would not take her encore, but contented herself with a sweeping bow and smile to the general public. As she turned to leave the platform her eyes met those of St. Errol, and she smiled at him.

A man seated next to him had been taking notes all the evening, and exclaimed to his companion :

"You see ! she smiled at some one in the audience ! Never knew Dalma do that before."

"Who is she ?" his friend asked.

"Don't know. No one knows but her agent, and he won't tell."

"The mystery's put on to increase the interest, probably," the second speaker said contemptuously.

"My dear fellow, you know nothing about it. She's much too true an artist, with much too fine a voice, to do anything tricky."

"Let us go round to the artists' room and offer to escort her home," St. Errol whispered to Stanley.

"You'll only court a rebuff if you go," Stanley replied.

However, as St. Errol would go, Stanley went with him.

St. Errol sent in his card, which was promptly returned to him.

"Madame Dalma had left five minutes ago," he was told.

His face bore an expression of disappointment, and Stanley's one of supreme satisfaction at his forecast having turned out to be correct. This brief little scene was witnessed by two people who were kept close to the comrades true by the pressure of the crowd. When St. Errol and Stanley moved on, one of these people said to her companion :

"Did you hear that ?"

"Yes, I did," the man replied curtly.

"Evidently that young fellow knows her, and had sent in his card to ask to see her."

"I should say just the reverse. Evidently that young fellow doesn't know her, or he wouldn't have sent in his card to Madame Dalma."

"How cross you are to-night ! You always are when you've been to hear that woman sing. For my part, I think nothing of her voice, and less of her looks. I wonder how——"

"Don't speculate about things of which you are ab-

solutely ignorant, Vixen. Come and have an oyster supper ; that's more in your line."

"And this is all I get for——" the woman was beginning passionately, when he interrupted her with a jeering laugh.

"Aren't oysters enough ? All right, then, you shall have champagne with them. Only, for heaven's sake, don't talk about people and things about which you have no more understanding than the beasts that perish."

"After that, I won't have any supper at all. I'll go home."

"All right, go. I shall enjoy my oysters in peace if you do."

But she did not go home. She shared his supper after all.

CHAPTER V.

A DECIDED STEP.

WHEN Mrs. Clifford reached home that night her first action—as it is that of all dainty and impecunious artists—was to rid herself of the exquisite dress which had cost her the fees of three or four engagements.

“It is an absolute necessity that you dress well on the concert-boards. Your public pays to see you look well the same as to hear you sing well,” her agent had said to her at starting. “But I need have no fear of you on that point, any more than I have of your exquisite and splendidly-trained voice ultimately placing you in the first flight. However, you must remember, Madame Dalma—you must remember that there are literally thousands fighting for the same goal. But you are a true artist, and will understand this.”

Mrs. Clifford remembered these words as she sat at supper that night, and looked at the glittering robe which was reclining at full length on a sofa previous to being delicately gone over with a dress-brush, and then put away in its silver paper wrappers.

She was eating supper, because a singer to live must eat. The voice has to be fed, whether or not the individual that owns that voice seems to require food or

not. So she was eating a substantial supper the while she was making sad plans for the future.

As soon as she had got herself into her dressing-gown—even before she had commenced that essential supper—she had denuded the bouquet of its magnificent white satin streamers, and put the flowers themselves in an immense vase of water. Her eyes wandered to them tenderly every now and again.

“What a dear boy he is!” she said, half aloud. “I wish I had never crossed his path, but I will never see him again, and—I hope he’ll soon forget me.”

By-and-by she commenced packing vigorously, and by the time she had concluded the work the rooms, which had been like gems in the sordid setting of that lodging-house, had resumed their normal aspect. Then she went to bed and slept, in spite of the turmoil of her spirit.

When Mrs. Bingham brought the coffee in the morning, followed by Jock, Mrs. Clifford’s heart was full to breaking. But she was not the kind of woman to cry before the landlady, as she would without doubt have cried before the dog had he been alone with her. So Jock received the usual patting and buttered roll. While he was eating the latter, Mrs. Bingham’s amazement and indignation found vent in words:

“You’ve been packing up, ma’am. Don’t tell me; I can see it with my own eyes. A nice name my house will have, his lordship going, and you going, too, as if something had happened that made yo think the house unfit to live in.”

Miserable as she was, Mrs. Clifford could not suppress a smile at the human selfishness which could consider no other interests than its own.

“ Lord St. Errol could hardly go on living in your lodgings when he has large country places to look after. As for me, I told you when I came that I might be obliged to leave any day, and you agreed to take a week’s rent when I went. Now I offer you a month’s rent if you promise me that you will not tell any one—*any one*—that I am going. Will you ? ”

Mrs. Bingham promised.

“ I shall want a cab by-and-by,” Mrs. Clifford said. “ When I want it I will ring.”

After the manner of many of us, Mrs. Bingham kept her promise to the letter—but not to the spirit. When she took in breakfast for her two gentlemen lodgers, she did not tell them that Mrs. Clifford was going away that day, and had given her (Mrs. Bingham) a month’s rent not to tell *any one* ; but she pursed up her lips so that they saw a secret was burning to escape through them. Moreover, she sighed deeply two or three times in the way she had been wont to sigh in old days when their rent was overdue. Finally, they heard her whisper as she went out of the room :

“ Ah, poor Jock, you’ll lose a friend, *you* will ! ”

“ What’s the old harriidan aiming at, do you think, Stanley ? ”

St. Errol’s face was flushed as he asked the question, and he looked unfeignedly anxious.

“ Can’t say,” said Stanley. “ We don’t owe her anything in these halcyon days, so it can’t be that.”

“ Do you think Mrs. Clifford is—a—is not well after the exertions of last night ? ”

“ Dear me, St. Errol, what an old woman you’re getting ! Why, in the name of all that’s probable, should the woman feel the exertions of last night more than

the exertions of any of the other nights of her life ? ”

“ Did you hear what Mrs. Bingham said to Jock ? ”

“ Yes. ”

“ Well, what could that mean ? ”

“ Probably that she wishes Jock to feel piquant pain at parting with Mrs. Bingham. ”

“ I think she referred to Mrs. Clifford in some way. ”

“ My dear boy, you’ve got Mrs. Clifford on the brain. Chuck all this nonsense, St. Errol. Go down to Cheshire and have a look at that lordly pleasure-house of yours. Miss St. Errol is all right with Mrs. Smithers, and Smithers is far more likely to pick up a snitable chaperon for Miss St. Errol than you are. You’re only mooning away your time here. ”

“ I’ll go—to-morrow, ” St. Errol said hesitatingly. “ I’ll go for a few days. But what good shall I do there without you, Stanley ? ”

“ You’ll fall on your feet all right enough. I’ll join when I get leave. ”

“ That’s a far cry. If I go you must go with me. ”

“ ‘ And wheresoever Mary went
The lamb was sure to go, ’ ”

Stanley quoted. ‘ You’ll have Jock, at any rate—won’t he, old boy ? And aren’t you the dearest old dog in the world ? Say ‘ Yes, ’ and you shall have this bone. ”

Jock, with the villainous eye cast on the bone, and the pious one on the giver of it, said “ Yes ” in a sharp snap.

“ Was it a good bone, Jock ? Tell me, and you shall have cream and biscuits.”

In days of yore it used to be mere milk and biscuits, but these are days of “ now,” not of “ yore.”

Jock spoke up eloquently for the proffered dainties, but as he didn't gobble it all up at one mouthful, St. Errol said :

“ Jock knows there's something up, something wrong ; he's off his feed. Come and tell his master, then. What is it ? Want to go out, then ? By Jove, Stanley ! the dog wants to go to Mrs. Clifford.”

“ Sympathetic dog,” Stanley laughed.

“ That's what he is,” St. Errol cried eagerly. “ He's as full of sympathy as his hide can hold. He found her out months before we did. Do you think,” he added sheepishly, “ that, as she is so fond of the dog, and the dog so devoted to her, it mightn't be rather a graceful thing to give him to her ? ”

Stanley wheeled round on his chair, planted his hands on his knees, and gazed steadily at his chum for a full minute. Then he said deliberately :

“ Look here, old chap, you're in a bad way. I'll send for some ice and get a doctor in to look at you. Perhaps you'll need the strait-jacket. Most likely you do, when you speak of giving Jock to 'her,' whoever she may be. Why, Jock's one of us, and the most sensible one at the present juncture. You'll be offering to give *me* to her next.”

They both roared at this, and Mrs. Clifford, sitting in her now desolate room above, heard their light laughter, and tried to find comfort in the thought that “ he ” would soon forget her. Every woman knows how truly consolatory this reflection is !

About an hour after the sound of wheels attracted Mrs. Clifford to the window. She saw the two young men get into a hansom, and at once rang for her cab. She was in a fever of anxiety for fear they should return before her luggage was piled up. The cabman seemed slow, and every minute an hour, until she was fairly away from the place where she had known at first peace, then bliss, then misery. The latter she was taking away with her. She had herself driven at once to her agent's, and fortunately found him disengaged.

"Have you booked me for any more London engagements?" she began abruptly.

"Not yet, but in a week I shall be able to offer you many."

"Don't get them for me: I want to go either to America or Australia."

"But, my dear madam, consider, just as you are on the highroad to success——"

"There are highroads to success elsewhere. If you will not help me, I will go to some one else."

He thought for a moment, and then said:

"I will cable to a New York agent who is getting up an English touring concert company; as soon as I have his reply you shall know it. Your address is——"

"Great Western Hotel, Paddington;" then she added impulsively: "I shall be grateful to you all my life if you help me to get away now."

"You may be away for eighteen months," he said, as he shook hands with her heartily.

"All the better for me if I am away for eighteen years," she said.

He won her gratitude, for a week later she sailed with a concert company for New York.

As soon as St. Errol had determined on taking the plunge and going down to Cheshire the following day, he lost no time in making his preparations. Mr. Smithers was invaluable. He found a valet who might have lived with St. Errol from his birth from the way in which he thoroughly comprehended his master from the moment he entered his lordship's service. A charming elderly lady—well born, well bred, and well principled—had been found to take upon herself the charge of Stella. Everything was settled as he drove back to the lodgings to fetch Jock ; they were to sleep at an hotel that night, and take leave of Mrs. Clifford—for a time.

He had no premonition of the blow in store for him as he entered, calling out gaily to Jock ; but Mrs. Bingham met him in tears.

“Tell Mrs. Clifford I've come to say good-bye. What's the matter ?”

“She's gone, my lord.”

“Gone ?”

“Yes, my lord—gone for good.”

St. Errol staggered like a drunken man, while Jock, with an expression of deepest woe on his face, sat up on his hind-legs, put his forepaws together, and waved them to and fro in deepest futile sympathy.

At that moment a carriage drew up at the door, and an unexpected visitor arrived upon the scene.

CHAPTER VI.

MR. CLIFFORD.

A CARRIAGE stopped, and the street door being still open, Mrs. Bingham was beginning to glorify herself at the sight of the windows of her opposite neighbors crowded with envious, gaping faces.

She had winded it abroad noisily that "one of the young gentlemen who had lived with her so long was a real lord," and this had caused a good deal of ill-feeling that was delightful to her to arise in this district that was of the lodging-house order. Now, this carriage and pair surely portended another peer. Her vision of glory was a brief one.

A tall dark man, with a slight stoop and the marks of more than slight dissipation on his pallid face, got out of the carriage and came leisurely up the steps. At sight of him St. Errol involuntarily retreated into his own fastness, for he recognized the man who, with a loud-looking lady companion, had been standing by when his card and Madame Dalma's message had been given to him last night at the concert-hall. But the stranger had already recognized him, and the recognition seemed to give the stranger pleasure.

"Is Mrs. Clifford at home?" he asked of the smiling, curtseying landlady.

"Please to walk in, sir. Mrs. Clifford—and oh, the turn it gave me!—Mrs. Clifford——"

"Give her this card, and tell her that her husband is impatient to see her. I am Mr. Clifford."

He smiled unpleasantly as he spoke, and St. Errol, who had heard the words as the stranger had intended that he should, was unwillingly impelled to step forward to the door of his room, half with the intention of closing it, half with the desire to get a nearer view of the man who dared to claim to be "her" husband.

"Mrs. Clifford left this morning, sir—packed up and left all sudden-like——"

"Where is she gone?" the stranger interrupted, still keeping his eyes on St. Errol, whose nerve was restored by the suddenness of this new event, and who was giving the intruder back look for look.

"I'm sure I don't know, sir," Mrs. Bingham replied, half whimpering. "I've done all I could to make the lady comfortable, and a nicer, more pleasant lady to——"

"Where is my wife, sir? What have you done with her?" the stranger asked, with sudden vehemence and a dangerous look in his eyes, of St. Errol.

"I wish indeed that I knew, but if I did I should not tell you," St. Errol said haughtily.

"You witness what he says," Mr. Clifford (for he really had lapsed into truth in declaring himself to be Mr. Clifford) said venomously, turning to Mrs. Bingham; "you hear him say that he would not tell me where my wife is 'even if he knew.' Undoubtedly you know, young man; I saw you at her concert last night. I saw her smile her thanks for the bouquet you sent her; I saw you call for her at the door of the artists' room; I find you at her lodgings this morning, and yet you

have the feeble audacity to tell me that you do not know where she is. I am neither a child nor a fool, though probably you think me one for wishing to take back such a wife as Dalma is——”

“ If you utter another word in that strain I’ll knock you down ! ” St. Errol interrupted, in a tone of such concentrated rage that Mr. Clifford retreated in haste to the top doorstep.

“ His lordship is as innocent as the babe unborn of the lady’s whereabouts,” Mrs. Bingham put in, with ill-advised partisanship. “ I’m sure you might have knocked him down with a feather just now when he came in and I told him Mrs. Clifford was gone.”

“ Oh, I might have knocked him down with a feather, might I ? ” Mr. Clifford took care to get one foot on the step of the carriage as he spoke. “ I shall ‘ knock him down ’ with something rather stronger than *that* before long.”

“ Can’t you take the word of a gentleman ? ” St. Errol asked furiously.

And Jock, seeing that there was something wrong, went like lightning, or, rather, like the agile fox terrier he was, for that leg of Mr. Clifford’s that was still left upon the pavement.

“ Come away, Jock ; let him alone,” St. Errol said contemptuously.

And Jock, with a long-drawn-out growl, did as he was requested to do.

When Mr. Clifford was safely ensconced in the carriage, he put his head out of the window, and called Mrs. Bingham.

“ What is that man’s name ? ” he asked.

“ He isn’t a—I mean he’s a lord, sir—Lord St.

Errol ; he've only just come to his rank, and a nicer young——”

“ I know ; that will do. When did Mrs Clifford leave ? ”

“ About three hours ago, sir.”

“ How did she go—in a cab or carriage ? ”

“ Cab, sir.”

“ Who fetched it ? ”

“ My girl, sir.”

“ Call your girl up.”

A sloppy, merry-looking girl, with shoes down at heel and hair hanging loose over her ears, answered the summons, and with perfect self-possession and keen enjoyment of the situation came up to the carriage window.

“ You fetched a cab this morning for Mrs. Clifford. Where did you fetch it from ? ”

“ The public-house at the corner.”

“ What was the number ? ”

“ I didn't see, sir. Missus was waiting, and I didn't notice the number, sir.”

“ Was it a strange cab, or one belonging to one of the stands close by ? ”

“ I didn't know the gentleman that drove it.”

“ Would you know the man again if you saw him ? ”

“ Oh no, sir ; I never looks much at men. Besides, I knew the lidy was in a hurry, so I says to him : ‘ Drive on to 24 ; ’ and then I went an errand.”

The servant had a clean heart though her clothes were dirty. Intuition taught her that ‘ time ’ was a matter of moment to the ‘ dear lidy ’ who had always been good to her, so with a gutter-born mental agility she dodged Mr. Clifford at every turn.

"Have you ever seen any one meet Mrs. Clifford—any one living in the house—when she comes home of an evening?"

Even he blushed faintly as he asked the question.

"Yes, sir, most times."

The girl's eyes were raised to his most frankly.

"Ah, who was it—a gentleman?"

"Yes, sir, a gentleman."

"Tell me who—who—tell me his name at once, girl."

"Jock, sir."

"Jock? What else?"

"Jock, the fox terrier, sir. He——"

"Drive on to the park!" Mr. Clifford shouted.

And Dalma's humble ally betook herself into the house, giggling.

Lord St. Errol called her into his room.

"You're a good little girl, Alice," he said kindly; and he emphasized his words with the gift of a sovereign.

"Thank your lordship. I'd 'a teased him longer if he 'adn't drove off in such a hurry."

"You *do* know that cabman's number, Alice. Tell it to me."

Alice looked up with a twinkle in her eye.

"I wouldn't say it wasn't 2012," she said demurely.

"And he stands——"

"Top corner of the street, your lordship."

"Go and fetch him," St. Errol ordered.

And presently 2012 was being interviewed by his lordship, and the latter was in possession of the address to which Mrs. Clifford had been driven.

But matters were not much further advanced when

he got there. The agent resolutely refused to give him Madame Dalma's temporary address.

"She gave it to me in confidence," he said. "Madame Dalma is not a woman to say one thing and mean another. What her motive may be in enveloping herself in mystery, I do not know, but it must be a good one, for a purer, better woman than she is never lived."

"I know that perfectly well," St. Errol said hotly. It is because she is so good, so perfect in every way, that I want to see her and warn her of a danger, with which I have just become acquainted, which is pursuing her."

"You may safely trust me to convey any message from you to her, or a letter if you like, but I will not give you her address."

"You may safely trust me also," St. Errol urged; and he was about to add: "For I worship the ground she treads on."

But a moment's reflection showed him that the speech was hardly calculated to win the agent's further confidence.

So it resulted in St. Errol writing a letter to Mrs. Clifford, in which he gave a full and fiery account of the morning's events, and Mr. Clifford's visit to her late lodgings. It concluded with a heart-broken appeal to her to see him once more, and he gave her his address at his hotel.

To this she replied with a note containing two words only: "Thanks. Finis." And when he had read them St. Errol knew that his boyish love-dream was over indeed.

The dread of falling in with her husband, who had married, humiliated, insulted, and deserted her through

no fault of hers, was so strongly upon her that she remained a close prisoner in the Great Western Hotel for three or four days ; then she was compelled to go out to get some lace which she had left to be cleaned at a shop in New Bond Street, and which would be useful on her tour. She was to sail the next day, and therefore, as she had no one to send, she veiled herself thickly, and went for it herself. As she came out of the shop a voice, with a ring of pain in it, cried out :

“ Mrs. Clifford ! Mrs. Clifford ! I have found you ; I won't lose you again ! ”

CHAPTER VII.

TEMPTED.

It was Stella—of course it was Stella. No one else would have hurled herself out of a carriage and flung her arms round another woman's neck in New Bond Street but Stella.

"Now I shall take you to him ; he's so ill, poor darling ! He has a hospital nurse with him, and Jock and Mr. Stanley ; and Mrs. Ogilvie and I go to see him every day. But always, when he doesn't know what he is saying, he keeps calling for you."

"That is only when he doesn't know what he is saying, Stella dear," Mrs. Clifford said, with a sorry smile.

Stella had not named him, but the woman who loved him knew intuitively that it was of Lord St. Errol the girl spoke.

"Get in," Stella said, with affectionate impressiveness. "Mrs. Ogilvie, this is my dear friend, Mrs. Clifford. Do get in."

"Yes, I will, if you will drive me to the Great Western Hotel."

"I shall drive you to the Albemarle, where Lord St. Errol is. The sight of you will do him more good than all the doctors and nurses in the world—won't it, Mrs. Ogilvie ?"

With all the desire in the world to oblige her charming and most extraordinarily-brought-up charge, Mrs. Ogilvie was too much a woman of the world to give in her adhesion to such a wild whim as this. But just as she was beginning to expostulate, Mrs. Clifford broke in with such dignified pathos that the others were compelled to listen to and obey her.

“My grief at hearing of Lord St. Errol’s illness is only equalled by my grief at being unable to go to him, but I must never see him again, dear Stella. He has only known me four or five days. I have watched him for six months, and each day with greater interest. It is not my fault that he ever knew me ; it is his misfortune and mine. Stella will listen to you,” she said, turning to Mrs. Ogilvie, “and you will make her understand why I must never see Lord St. Errol again, and why I am sailing for America to-morrow, when I tell you that I have a husband.”

“But not alive ?” Stella gasped out. “No, it can’t be true ! not alive !”

“My dear,” Mrs. Ogilvie said, putting her cool, calm hand on Stella’s, “you must not speak as if you wished Mrs. Clifford’s husband dead.”

“That’s exactly what I do ! No, I don’t quite mean that, but I do wish that he had never lived.”

Stella could not bring herself to make any further concession to propriety and humanity than was contained in these words. During the last few days of his dangerous illness Stella had come to take a deep and affectionate interest in the sick man, though his sickness was caused by his overwhelming and disappointed love for another woman. She would have braved Mrs. Grundy right and left to have given him a minute’s

pleasure. That Mrs. Clifford, who undoubtedly did care for him greatly, should calmly speak of going off to America the following day without seeing him, when every facility was offered her for doing so, was incomprehensible to the girl, who had been brought up in absolute ignorance of what the world's verdict is on a woman who even seems to forget that she is a wife.

"What are your plans—your professional ones—in America?" Mrs. Ogilvie asked.

She was a great concert-goer, and the personnel of the beautiful soprano was well known to her.

Mrs. Clifford explained that she was engaged at a good salary to go out with Madame Valdi's Concert Company; that they were to open in New York, and tour through the United States; that the advance agent prophesied fine receptions and big houses for them in all the big cities; and, finally, that she intended to live in her art, devote herself exclusively to study and work, and, if possible, forget the past and leave it behind her.

When she had finished detailing her plans, she said to Stella:

"You have a bit of my past that I didn't mean to leave behind me, dear. I will write to you, and you must write to me, on condition that you never tell Lord St. Errol anything about me, that you never mention me to him. Will you promise this?"

Stella glibly gave the required promise just as they drew up at the entrance to the Great Western Hotel. As Stella was giving her friend a parting hug she exclaimed:

"Oh, you've got a lovely locket, just like one I have!"

Then there were more good-bys, and kissing, and tears, and then Mrs. Clifford found herself standing alone outside the hotel.

Alone only for a few moments ; then a well-known little brougham drew up, and out of it stepped Mr. Clifford.

She shuddered as he approached her, hat in hand, with an air of mock obsequious courtesy—shuddered, not with fear, but with antipathy.

“Can I have half an hour’s private conversation with you, madam ?” he asked.

“Certainly ; but it must be in the public saloon. I have no private sitting-room.”

“I have taken some trouble to secure the inestimable privilege of a few words with my fair wife,” he went on sneeringly. “I saw you get into a carriage in New Bond Street, and I followed you, with this happy result—that I have found you.”

She wasted no time by replying to this, but led the way quickly to the saloon, where she seated herself, and motioned him to a chair at some little distance.

“I have come,” he began, “to make a proposal to you which I think—I hope—will be as agreeable to you as it is to me.”

He paused, but she said nothing. She sat very still, and looked at him steadily.

He went on to describe his visit to her late lodgings, his brief and warm interview with Lord St. Errol, and, lastly, the intention he had briefly entertained of putting her into the Divorce Court. Her bosom heaved and her eyes flashed when he told her this ; still she did not speak.

“Does the prospect terrify you, my lady ?”

“Not at all,” she said quietly. “Why should an idle threat terrify me?”

“I have now to propose a pleasanter alternative. Why do you not divorce *me*? You could do it easily enough; then you would be free to marry that love-sick boy who has fretted himself into a fever on your account.”

“What do you take me for?”

She spoke so coolly that he began to congratulate himself on his diplomatic move.

“A woman!” he replied.

“Yes, a woman. Such an one as——”

“As whom, for instance?”

“As you best know and understand. But I should have thought that you remembered enough about me to know that nothing the world can offer me would induce me to commit such a deadly sin as to divorce you.”

He rose up.

“Is that all you have to say? Is that your final word?”

“It is.”

“Well, I think you are a foolish woman. If you did as I suggested, you would have rank, position, wealth, and the legal love of a man who adores you.”

“There are two other things I should have which you seem to have forgotten.”

“What are they?” he asked.

“An unquiet conscience and a lost soul.”

He seemed about to speak, thought better of it, then rose up and bowed low as he said: “Good-morning, madam,” and left her.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE AWAKENING OF STELLA.

MRS. OGILVIE, the widow of a general and the daughter of a good house, had a very nice, comfortable income of her own ; so it was neither need nor greed, but sheer kind-heartedness, which had induced her to take charge of Stella and launch her into society.

She had a charming little flat in town, and a very pretty cottage in the country. She had legions of friends, both men and women, for she was one of those women, whose hearts remain young, but who are quite contented to look their full age, whatever that may be. She had a fine taste in literature, and contrived that the best books of the day should be conveniently to Stella's hand without ever trying to coerce the girl into reading them. She liked society, knowing it well, and being quite capable of winnowing the grain from the chaff. She loved music and the drama, and after the first week she was as good as a guide-book to the Royal Academy. A thorough aristocrat in theory, she was a large-hearted Bohemian in practice. Any denizen of the "beautiful city of Prague" whom she chanced to meet who showed talent and merit was a welcome guest at her London flat or her pretty country cottage. Scandal never lifted its ugly head at her delightful little

dinners to two or three people, dinners where you did not meet with all the delicacies of the season, but where you met many a delicacy of mind and heart.

This, faintly sketched, was the woman to whose care Stella St. Errol was entrusted.

While St. Errol was lying ill, Stella had refused to go out at all ; but when he took the right turn the girl went with all her heart into all the amusements that were provided for her. Acting under St. Errol's instructions, Stanley had her mare and groom sent up, and he (Stanley), still acting under her guardian's instructions, was her constant escort.

He had given up the Admiralty clerkship now, and was relying entirely on journalism, in which he had made a good mark, and by which he made a good income.

Sometimes he felt himself to be a fool for his pains in seeing so much of Stella, and he would leave, vowing he would "cut it all, and never see her again."

But these vows were invariably broken, and he tried to persuade himself they were justifiably broken. St. Errol could not or would not do without his companionship, and St. Errol was still far too weak to be thwarted. Accordingly, when St. Errol would ask this "special one" of the young lions of the daily press to "Look after dear little Stella for me, old chap. Though I am miserable myself, I don't want my misery to react on that poor child. You can spare her an hour, can't you, and go for a spin with her?"—when St. Errol would speak in this way, what could Stanley do but take her for the spin, and sink deeper into the mire of hopeless love as he did it?

Sometimes he felt that he must lay bare his wound

to St. Errol, and tell the latter that for his heart and honor's sake he must "cut it," and go for that wonderful "cure," absence. But he knew that St. Errol would refuse to see any difficulties in his path, and would want to smooth them over, even if he could be made to see them. So he continued to ride with Miss St. Errol : he had surreptitiously gone through a course of riding-lessons under the guidance of a past-master in the art of equitation, so he cut a very respectable figure in the Row, though he was by no means up to the mark of the magnificent young horsewoman whom he attended.

Stella was very friendly with Stanley, but not in the frankly, almost childish way she had been previous to her coming out. Her moods were less variable ; she was not subject to such violent transitions of thought and manner. In fact, "she was developing from an inexperienced child into a girl of the world," he thought, and he was sorry for it.

Mrs. Ogilvie invited him frequently to dinner, and he always went, chiefly, he thought, to oblige St. Errol, who liked to hear of Stella and her daily doings and surroundings. Mrs. Ogilvie had put a stop to Stella's visits to her guardian as soon as he was out of danger, before, indeed, people had time to shake their heads and say it looked odd.

"I suppose there are no end of fellows after my pretty ward?" St. Errol asked, when Stanley came back one night from one of these dinners.

"There would be, only it's the mystery of her birth keeps many a right good fellow off," Stanley said unwillingly. He hated discussing Stella and Stella's matrimonial chances even with St. Errol.

"Obstinate old man Smithers is," St. Errol said irritably; "he knows, and he might just as well tell me, who and what the girl is. I don't believe there is anything disgraceful about her parentage, do you?"

"Of course I don't; nothing disgraceful ever can have had, or ever will have, anything to do with her."

St. Errol was thoughtful for a short time. Then he said:

"I know I'm well enough to travel. Shall we start for Errol the day after to-morrow, Stanley?"

"I think we had better."

Stella was strangely silent, both when she was first told they were going, and also when the two young men drove round to say good-by—so silent that Stanley's jealous fears immediately scented a rival, and fancied her thoughts were dwelling on him. St. Errol, for whom there was but one woman in the world at this juncture, did not observe her abstraction, and therefore did not speculate about it.

"As soon as we have shaken into place, you'll bring Stella to Errol, won't you, Mrs. Ogilvie?" St. Errol asked, when they were leaving.

"Yes, certainly; but Stella and I are going to my little cottage first. It's just as well you young men should have a little time to yourselves," Mrs. Ogilvie answered St. Errol, but she looked at Stanley as she spoke.

"Just as well," Stanley said curtly, and Stella's color rose angrily.

"Good-bye, Stella," St. Errol said kindly. "I shall be glad when you come. You'll be able to show us all the ins and outs of the place. I shall leave most of it unexplored until you come."

A few months ago Stella would have asked Stanley if "he would not be glad, too." Now she scarcely looked at him. And the tone in which he wished her good-bye might have come from the Arctic regions.

It was early in August, and people were flocking out of town. Stella had enjoyed her first season, but, notwithstanding, she had girded at not having been "presented." But Mrs. Ogilvie, after a conference with some sound authorities on the subject, had decreed that it would not be wise to bring that special, fierce light to bear upon her unknown charge.

The girl was quite ready to go to the cottage, to go anywhere, in fact, away from the London she had so longed to know. She had not met with any social disappointments. She had been immensely admired. She had danced at every ball to her heart's content, and above and beyond these things she had received offers of marriage from two wealthy men whose money had brought them into society, and from a charming young linesman, who had nothing but his pay, and who, because she would not marry him, exchanged into the Army Service Corps and went out to South Africa, where he lived remote from his kind upon tinned meats until polo usurped Stella's place in his affections and he felt himself again.

The cottage was a delightful old red-brick affair that had once upon a time long, long ago been a way-side inn. But the road in front of it had been turned, and it now stood in its own modestly-proportioned grounds. They were kept with a modesty that equaled their proportions, for reasons that shall be hereafter described.

The old house was long and low, covered thickly

with clematis and Japanese honeysuckle, myrtle, ivy, and other evergreen joys. Clambering freely amongst everything, taking the chimneys even into its loving clasp, was the small-leaved amphilopsis, so brightly green in spring and summer, so richly orange and red in winter—welcome wherever it went at the cottage, even when it (as it frequently did) sealed several windows up hermetically.

The old bowling-green at the end of the cottage had been turned into a tennis-court, but it was so seldom used that Mrs. Ogilvie's useful man, Jem, turned it to practical account by letting her plump pony, Puck, nibble it down during the hot summer days and nights. There were some trees at one end of it—notably a weeping-ash, under which Puck could comfortably stable himself when the sun was high.

Red geraniums and mignonette ran rampant in the borders, and there were some glass shades—designed for hotbeds—under which chickweed grew luxuriantly. But peaches grew freely on the sunny south wall, and there was a mulberry-tree which Stella soon found out, the fruit of which was so rich, large, and luscious that strong men might have been forgiven had they wept when leaving it.

The inside of the cottage was all chintz and Indian matting, and flowers and fresh air. They were served by an excellent woman, who cooked for them, and waited upon them when she had cooked in a way that made one blink and ask if she was not her own double. Her niece assisted her. This young person passed her life in a fierce warfare against dust. She would dust a spotless chair before you sat down upon it, and dust it even more assiduously when you rose from it. Her

aunt said she "really thought a cobweb would throw Maria into convulsions." Stella, who had never seen "convulsions," but had been familiar with cobwebs at Castle Errol, tried to keep one of the latter dark in her room until a fitting opportunity arrived for springing it upon Maria. But Maria was too many for her ; and after that one abortive attempt Stella gave up all hope of studying convulsions as rendered by Maria.

All the neighborhood came to greet Mrs. Ogilvie. Between the country neighbors and Mrs. Ogilvie there was a great system of give-and-take as far as luncheons and afternoon teas were concerned, and it soon became horribly monotonous to Stella. She pined for the society of the men who had first taught her that there was life outside Rose-in-Vale and Errol Castle. She realized now what golden days those had been when she used to go for exhilarating spins in the Park, and elsewhere, with Stanley. She longed for some younger women friends than Mrs. Ogilvie—for Mrs. Clifford, who had not kept her promise of writing yet. She longed to get away from herself and her own thoughts, and she did not know how to do it.

At last one evening, when she was driving the pony Puck through one of the lovely lanes where the autumn tints were richest, she mooted a matter that had long been seething in her active brain.

"You know, dear Mrs. Ogilvie, that I have no name, no proper name ; I'm not a St. Errol."

"You are loved and treated as one."

"But I'm not one, all the same. I'm a nameless being, and I want to make a name for myself."

Mrs. Ogilvie was far too clever a woman of the world to express any surprise.

“Yes, dear?” she said interrogatively.

“You will promise not to be shocked when I tell you?”

“I promise.”

“Then listen,” said Stella, whipping up the pony.

CHAPTER IX.

STELLA'S PLAN.

WHEN Stella whipped up the pony, the latter responded by trotting briskly for about thirty yards, and the swifter motion made it easier for Stella to begin her confidence.

"You will either think me very ambitious or very foolish," she began, and when she had got as far as that the pony relapsed into his usual sluggish pace. "I wish Puck would trot; I can't tell you in cold blood while Puck is crawling along in this way."

Mrs. Ogilvie stole a glance at the girl who had become dear as a daughter to her, and, with the tact of a mother, said :

"All in good time, dear. You will tell me your plan when it's needful I should know it, and you are always sure of my sympathy and help."

Stella changed the reins into her right hand, and with her disengaged one gave Mrs. Ogilvie's hand a hearty grip.

"It's needful you should know it now. Never mind, Puck, you may crawl if you like; I feel better now. Well, this is my plan : I mean to go on the stage."

Mrs. Ogilvie suppressed any sign of it, even if she felt surprise. In perfectly natural cheerful tones she said :

“ Yes, dear child ; and how do you propose getting there ? I am afraid—I am very much afraid that I don’t know any managers. I know some struggling young actors and actresses, but they are in the thick of the fray for themselves. Managers are the people to know, of course.”

“ And I know two or three already.”

“ You do ! how have you managed that, dear ? ”

“ Called on them. Often when you have thought that I was out wasting my time and money shopping I have been interviewing managers and agents with a view to making a career and a *name* for myself.”

“ You dear little business-woman ! Well, with what success ? ”

“ I’ll tell you. I took care to go perfectly dressed, you may be sure. Simplicity wasn’t in it, but it was the simplicity that costs, as you have taught me. The first man I saw said he would let me walk on in a new piece he is just going to bring out, but he said I should have nothing to say. I didn’t like the idea of that, so I begged him to let me say *something*, and he laughed at me ! I walked out of his office, and went to another.”

“ Ah, you couldn’t stand the rebuff, dear ! Well, you’ll meet with a good many in the profession. How did you fare with the next manager ? ”

“ Oh, he was charming ! He asked me if I would read a part to him, and he gave me the part of a London slavey with a lot of Cockney dialect in it. She’s a sentimental, novel-reading slavey, delighting in high-sounding names and sentiments. He roared with laughter, and said I should do. He offered me the part at a salary of two pounds a week. Fancy my earnings *two pounds* a week ! Then he walked out of

the office, telling me about rehearsals and things, and you should have seen his face when he saw the brougham. He said at once that he hoped soon 'to be able to offer me a better part worthy of my undoubted talent.' "

"Human nature, dear child. And when do you begin?"

"The rehearsals begin in November. You don't think me ungrateful and foolish, do you?"

"Neither one nor the other. There is another to consult, you know."

"You mean my guardian?"

"Yes."

"Ah, but when I tell him how unhappy I am at being nameless and dependent, he will let me do as I like. He promised me when I knew him first that I should always do as I liked."

"A rash promise. Still, I am sure you would never do anything to hurt his feelings, nor will he do anything to hurt yours. He has a wise counsellor in Mr. Stanley."

"I hope he won't consult Mr. Stanley about me."

"How very fat and lazy Puck is getting! You really must tell Jem not to give him so much hay, Stella."

"I will," Stella said, laughing. "I enjoy a wordy tussle with Jem; he is so sublimely conceited."

"And with it all he has so many good qualities. He is very honest. The man I had before him grew plenty of fruit, but he either ate it all or sold it all. Now, Jem fails to grow any fruit; but, at any rate, I have the pleasure of feeling that I am not being cheated."

“How shall I begin about Puck? Shall I say he’s very lazy?”

“If you do, Jem will tell you that’s the blackberry season. All horses are lazy in the blackberry season. I know every one of his excuses by heart. Go straight to the root of the evil, and tell him Puck is too fat.”

“You’re afraid to tell him yourself, I know you are,” Stella said gleefully.

“Yes, I am. I shall hide behind the window-curtain and listen to your discomfiture, for you’ll get worsted, I’m sure.”

That evening Mrs. Ogilvie wrote to Lord St. Errol:

“Invite us to Errol as soon as you please; we are quite ready to go. Stella has a scheme in her pretty head. You must gain her confidence very carefully. She is as shy as a hare, and as quick to take fright if she thinks she may be thwarted. Gain her confidence, and then—— I leave the rest to you.”

Jem was not in a good mood when Miss St. Errol went out to tackle him on the subject of Puck’s superfluous flesh. He was a law to himself, like Napoleon the Great and George Eliot, and other mighty men and women of valor. Puck (together with the garden) had been in his charge for many years, and Puck still lived to tell the tale. He was a West Country man, and at the best of times—that is, when they very much applauded him for whatever he did or left undone—he had a very poor opinion of ‘up-country folk.’ So now, when Stella said, ‘You give the pony too much hay, Jem; he can hardly waddle,’ Jem regarded her curiously out of the corner of an oblique eye, and retorted that no one could teach him nothing about horses; *he knew*

what was best for the pony. Hadn't he had it ever since 'twas a four-year-old ? and 'twould be fourteen come next May.

"But Puck mustn't have so much hay, Jem," Miss St. Errol said, sticking to her point.

"You leave Puck to me, miss. I know what's best for Puck, and he knows that I know it. Why, as soon as he hears my step in the morning, there he is poking his nose against the stable window."

"Which you ought to keep open, Jem, this hot weather. I wonder the poor pony isn't suffocated, shut up there in that stifling stable."

"Keep the window open—the *window open* ! Why that pony'd die if I put him in a draught. I opened *my* bedroom window once, for the heat was such that I could scarce breathe, and I've had the rheumatics ever since. Windows was made to let in the light and keep out the draught, miss ; and I'd no more put Puck in the way of getting his death o' chill than I'd put myself in it ;" and Jem turned away, muttering, "Fresh air and open windows and too much hay ! As if any-one could teach *me* anything about horses !"

Stella was baffled, but not beaten. She knew Mrs. Ogilvie was laughing at her behind the curtain, so she sauntered after the contumacious Jem, and when she overtook him (he was hoeing mercilessly at a bed containing nothing by this time) she said :

"Now, Jem, look here : My horses—and they're beauties—*live* with their stable windows open, except when there's a blizzard on. If you'll try it three of these hot nights with Puck, I'll give you this."

She held up a little piece of gold, and Jem looked at it for a few moments. Then he shook his head.

“ Couldn’t do it, miss, not even for that. There’s many that would do it—np-country folks would—but I ain’t like that.”

Stella was losing patience.

“ Here take it,” she said, tossing him the half-sovereign, “ and go on your own way and kill that poor pony with overstuffing and foul air.”

“ I ain’t killed ’im yet,” Jem said morosely.

But he pocketed the half-sovereign, and vowed a vow that Puck should *not* be subjected to draughts while under his care. Then he went on hoeing the bed with nothing in it, and was happy in the conviction that he had “ got the better on the np-country young lady.”

“ Well,” Mrs. Ogilvie asked when Stella went in, “ is Puck still to live under the shadow of apoplexy from overfeeding, and of being asphyxiated from foul stable air ?”

“ He is, according to the conservative Jem ; but when that gentleman goes to-night, I shall take the law into my own hands and nail the stable window open. When he sees in the morning how much fresher the pony is, he will relent.”

“ Not he, Stella ; low obstinacy never relents. ‘ A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.’ I am afraid you will find that the only effect of your determined action will be that Jem will double Puck’s hay, and stuff up every crevice there may be in the stable now.”

“ I wouldn’t stand it if I were you.”

“ You’ll stand many things when you are my age that you wouldn’t stand now, my girl. And now to dinner with what appetite we may after our defeat.”

For many days Stella was busily engaged in brisk

correspondence with various agents and managers. She was not a young lady to let grass grow under her feet or to hide her light behind a bushel when she had an object in view. She had joined the Actors' Association, in order that she might have a permanent address, and the number of the letters that were forwarded to her from there was legion. She wrote to every one whose name struck her in the columns of the *Stage* and *Era* as being possibly likely to be useful to her. As to every one she told the triumphant fact that she had been offered the part of Oriana in the "Star of India," her appeals for future encouragement were received with respect and answered, even if not definitely granted. With this she was quite content, for the indefinite promises were numerous, and in the meantime she felt sure that Oriana would reveal a good deal of the dramatic power which she felt confident she possessed.

This beautiful sustaining faith in herself, which she shared in common with every other aspirant for the stage's honor, kept her from dwelling overmuch on what she was now teaching herself to think was the degradation of being nameless and dependent.

It was quite in good spirits, therefore, that she took leave of Puck and Jem—she had nailed up the stable window, and before seven the next morning it was shut again—and started with Mrs. Ogilvie for Errol Castle.

Most of her life had been passed here, for Rose-in-Vale had been only a late-in-life love of the late Lord St. Errol's. She knew every nook and corner of the place—or, at least, she thought she did. St. Errol had kept his promise, and deferred his explorations until the arrival of his ward.

She forgot all about her new scheme and her theatrical ambitions as soon as she found herself back in the house that had been hers from babyhood. Her own rooms were hers still, unaltered and undisturbed.

“His lordship said everything was to be left exactly as they’ve always been until you came, miss,” the housekeeper told her, and Stella gave vent to a low cry of delight at finding herself back in the beautiful rooms where she had reigned a solitary little queen. “And another thing, miss: His Lordship hasn’t been half over the castle yet; he said he should wait for you to show it to him.”

“How dear and kind he is!” Stella said, and then she sighed. Had Mr. Stanley been over the castle yet? she wondered, or had he, too, waited for her to show it to him?

A feeling of petty pride forbade her asking, but she did long to know.

That evening, when they were all walking in the garden that had always been Stella’s special joy, the one she called the Kingdom of Chrysanthemums, because no other flowers were allowed there in the autumn, St. Errol dropped behind with Mrs. Ogilvie.

“Now tell me: what is Stella’s scheme?” he began.

“I wish her to tell you herself. I wish you to hear it first from her. If I told you, I might unconsciously bias you one way or the other.”

“Naturally, whatever it is, I shall consult you and ask for your advice. It isn’t that—she hasn’t got engaged, has she?”

Mrs. Ogilvie laughed.

“Indeed it is nothing of that kind. Hers is a very transparent nature, dear little soul! and I can assure

you, in spite of the admiration she has excited, that she has never taken the slightest interest in any man but yourself and Mr. Stanley."

He looked pleased ; even by moonlight she could see that.

"I wish she would take more than an interest in Stanley," he said presently.

"Perhaps she will in time, when he shows the interest he takes in her a little more openly."

"Look at them now," St. Errol said ; " she has got Jock in her arms, and Stanley is patting Jock's head because it is resting on her shoulders. I know. I have felt the same when I've seen Jock in Mrs. Clifford's arms."

"My poor boy ! Haven't you got over that yet ?" Mrs. Ogilvie said compassionately.

"Got over it ! No. I fell in love with her thinking she was free. I can't unlove her because later on I found that she was fettered. I saw at a glance, when the fellow came to hunt her up at the lodgings, that he was a cruel-natured brute as well as a dissipated one. I wonder where she is now ?"

"She has gone to America with a concert company."

"Poor little darling ! It's hard that she should have to fight the battle alone. I have heard that the musical profession isn't half as kind as the theatrical. They'll get jealous of her, and hurt her feelings a dozen times a day, probably."

"Don't take such a pessimistic view of her lot, dear Lord St. Errol. She loves her art ; that and her unde-filed conscience will support her under all her difficulties and trials."

"Love of art and a clear conscience are all very well

in their way, but she's a woman, and I'll stake my life, though she only saw me to speak to twice, that she cares for me."

Meanwhile Stella and Stanley had sauntered on through the long lines of chrysanthemums, whose sweetly-bitter, aromatic fragrance filled the air. Jock had wriggled out of Stella's arms, and was now exhausting himself in a vain endeavor to retrieve an agile cat. In Jock's place she now held a huge white, loose-petalled chrysanthemum that looked like a mop or a Skye terrier.

"Papa always used to call this my garden," she was explaining. "It was my fancy to have only one sort of flower in it at a time. In the spring I used to have it all daffodils and narcissus; in the summer all geraniums, of every color, size, and height; and in the autumn, as you see, all chrysanthemums. Do you like the idea?"

"I prefer a greater variety. I like a mixture of flowers best. All one kind in one bed if you like, but not a whole garden full of one sort only."

"I might have known that, being my taste, you wouldn't approve of it."

He looked down at her brilliant little face, and in the clear moonlight he saw that it was quivering and very pale.

"Why do you say that?" he asked. "Heaven knows I am only too well disposed to think everything you do right and perfect."

"Are you? Then, I think I'll tell you—— No, I won't; I must tell my guardian first. I owe it to him, being my guardian, to tell him first."

Stanley felt his heart grow cold. It was coming, then, this announcement that he dreaded, namely, that

she, the sweet star of his soul, was engaged to one of the "fashionable frivolous asses" whom he detested with the powerful detestation with which we do regard the obnoxious unknown.

"Certainly, if it is anything important, anything of vital importance, St. Errol is the first person to be told and consulted."

"It is of vital importance to me, but I am a nameless nobody, and have no right to consider anything vital that concerns myself only."

"Whatsoever concerns you is of the first importance to us—to St. Errol, I mean."

"Oh, Joek has caught the cat—no, he hasn't—and she has slipped away from him. What a dear black cat! I want a black kitten."

"Do you? You shall have one."

"I don't want it *just* yet. If I have it about the middle of October it will do. I can teach a kitten a lot of things in a fortnight, can't I?"

"To be sure you can. Are you going to teach it parlor tricks to amuse Mrs. Ogilvie with in the winter?"

"No, not parlor tricks—something much more serious," she said.

And then her laughter pealed out gleefully; he was so hopelessly at sea about her motive for wanting to train a cat.

"Stella," Mrs. Ogilvie called out from the other side of the garden, "we are going in; don't stay out and get a chill, dear, or shall I send you a cloak?"

"Don't go in yet," Stanley whispered.

But Stella desired to punish him for something—she was not quite sure for what—so she went in, and was angry with herself for having done so all the rest of the evening.

CHAPTER X.

A STRIKING LIKENESS.

MRS. MILLETT, the housekeeper at Errol Castle, was not the least fussy or officious. Born and brought up on the estate, the weal and wo, the fortunes and fame, the dignity and importance, of the St. Errols were as dear to her as her life. But she had never obtruded her solicitude and loyalty upon any member of the family ; in fact, the late lord had reigned alone, and had no family upon whom anybody could obtrude anything, and he himself was not the type of man to admit of easy approach from any subordinate. Nevertheless, he had entrusted a secret to Mrs. Millett, or, rather, he had permitted her to share it with him, because he was unable to avoid doing so. This secret she was now bound to impart to the new lord before he took the projected tour of the castle under the guidance of his ward.

Day after day since his arrival she had intended telling him, and day after day she had deferred doing so, simply because she had thought it a matter of no importance. Since the previous night, however, her views had changed, and this morning she sent a message to ask his permission to see him in the library.

The library was a fine room, lofty and spacious, and

the well-filled bookcases surrounded it on every side. There was apparently only one entrance, the door, namely, that opened from the great hall.

"Your lordship is going over the castle with Miss St. Errol this morning, she tells me. She knows the castle, but there are two rooms which his late lordship never allowed Miss St. Errol to enter ; indeed, she is not even aware that these rooms exist. His lordship spent much of his time in them. These are the rooms."

She crossed the library, and pressed on what looked like the elaborate binding of an old tome. The sham case and book-bindings slowly slid on one side, leaving a door exposed to view. This door she opened, and led the way across a narrow passage into a little sitting-room. St. Errol followed her, and as he did so he cried out, half in consternation, half in admiration : "Stella !"

For there opposite to him hung a magnificently painted portrait of a woman in the dress of thirty years ago—a woman so exactly like his ward that it might have been her portrait. At the foot of the portrait there was a shelf, and on this was laid a wreath and a cross of withered flowers.

"Tell me all you know about this, Mrs. Millett," he asked, and his heart beat high with the hope that here was the clue to Stella's parentage.

"This is all I know, my lord. His late lordship left here suddenly one day, saying he might be away for a week or two. He didn't take his man with him, which I thought strange, as he was very dependent on his man. In a week he came back, bringing with him Miss Stella, then quite a little baby, and this picture. He had these rooms fitted up—here is the bedroom—

and this picture hung, but no one saw the picture. I was the only person to enter these rooms besides himself, but when I came in a thick curtain always hung over the picture. That curtain I never raised for a moment until last night, when I came here to dust and straighten the rooms, thinking you might like to show them to Miss Stella. When I drew back the curtain I thought it was her living self for a moment. Now I have told your lordship all I know."

"It must be her mother. Keep this discovery to yourself, Mrs. Millett. Until I know a great deal more about the matter, Miss St. Errol must not hear a whisper of it."

"No one will hear a whisper of it from me, my lord."

"I'm sure of that. Send word to Mr. Stanley to come to me in the library."

When Stanley came—and came rather unwillingly, for Stella had just thawed enough to offer to walk down to the lake with him—he found St. Errol in a state of excitement that appeared ridiculous to Stanley until he had been shown the portrait.

"What do you think of it?" St. Errol asked, as he drew the curtain aside and revealed Stella.

"It's her mother, of course, but who the dence *was* her mother that she should have had a shrine made for her portrait, while at the same time the portrait was concealed from the profane gaze of any other mortal than your cranky old predecessor?" Stanley said discontentedly.

He would not have cared how humble Stella's origin might prove to be. What he disliked about the matter was the environment of mystery, which the discovery of this portrait only deepened.

"She looks like a lady," St. Errol put in eagerly; "in fact, our dear little Stella can't be anything but thoroughbred."

"She looks like a lovely woman well dressed in the hideous dress of that period. It reminds me of that awful picture of the Empress Eugénie surrounded by crinolines and the ladies of her Court, by Winterhalter."

"I shall have a search now for letters or diaries or something that may let a little light in on the case," St. Errol said, beginning to tug away at the handles of some locked drawers in a writing-table as he spoke.

"You had better let sleeping dogs lie. The poor old fellow evidently wished to keep it dark while he was alive. Why should you try and unearth it now he's dead?"

"I wish I had brought Wilkins" (Wilkins was the late lord's valet); "he would know where the keys are. Ass I was to leave him at Rose-in-Vale! I'll wire to him to come at once."

"Well, I'm no use to you, and as Miss St. Errol is going to stroll down to the lake with me, I'll be off."

"Don't say anything about this to her, Stanley."

"Do you take me for a congenital idiot? Do you mean to spend your whole morning in these cheerful apartments? Poof! I feel mildewed myself already."

"Nonsense! the skylight's open. But I won't keep you."

"No; I am sure you won't," Stanley said, as he went off cheerfully to rejoin Miss St. Errol.

But when he rejoined her Miss St. Errol's mood had changed, and his cheerfulness vanished. Mrs. Ogilvie, for once in her life, had been indiscreet. She had ex-

pressed pleasure when Stella told her of the projected stroll down to the lake.

“Now, why do you say you’re ‘glad’? Why should you be glad that Mr. Stanley is going to walk to the lake and back in my company? If you think it’s a condescension on his part I won’t go.”

“Oh, Stella, Stella! you dear pugnacious little girl! Can’t you see that Mr. Stanley looks upon it as an act of condescension on your part that you allow him to be your escort?”

“He can’t do that. I’m a nameless nobody. I wish—I wish——”

“What, dear?”

“That I had never met Mr. Stanley, that I had never been born, that I could get away from this place which I have no right to regard as my home. I’ll tell my guardian to-day that I shall break my heart unless I get away at once and begin to work for myself.”

It was at this moment that Stanley came back to her. He saw that a storm was raging, and tried to ignore it.

“Now for the lake, Miss St. Errol. I hope we may find a few water-lilies.”

He picked up his cap and pipe and tobacco-pouch as he was speaking, making quite a little business of it in his desire to evade the stormy blue eyes that were so angrily trying to meet his.

“I am not going to the lake,” she began; then a sob choked her, and she had to pause for a few moments.

He, still looking away from her (poor fellow! it cost him some expenditure of moral strength to do it), tried to ease the situation by saying:

“I don’t think there’s any chance of rain. You had much better come. It will be lovely on the lake.”

"I can't go on the lake. I want to see Lord St. Errol at once—at *once*! He is my guardian. I'm a nice thing to be 'guarded,' nameless waif that I am. I——"

Again a hardly-suppressed sob choked her utterance.

"St. Errol is in the library. Shall I take you to him?" Stanley asked deliberately.

His heart was aching for the poor, proud, passionate little creature, but he knew that any sign of sympathy would be wasted upon her now.

"No, thank you; I will go to him alone. Why should you take me to him? *You* are not burdened with the responsibility of me as he is, poor fellow! How he must hate being bothered with me! how he must despise me for limply letting myself remain a bother to him!"

Mrs. Ogilvie signaled to Stanley to leave the room. When he had gone, she said:

"Stella, dear child, you must not go to your guardian in this hysterical state. He would rightly put his veto on your desire to go on the stage if he saw you in this uncontrollable state of passionate emotion about nothing."

Stella sobbed.

"I am an old woman," Mrs. Ogilvie went on, "and I don't ask for many pleasures in life; but this one I do ask, and that is that I have a drive round the Peak district this afternoon. We can't go very far to-day, but we can manage Kinder Scout, and that's the highest point of the Peak. To-morrow we will go to Chatsworth and Haddon Hall."

"To-morrow I may be far from here," Stella said in tones of woe.

"Oh, nonsense, dear child! You can't do things

in such a hurry. Think of what a wealth of health you lay in by roaming through this wild, beautiful district. You'll want all your health and strength, you know, for your first campaign on the stage."

"I know Chatsworth and Haddon Hall well; I've been there a dozen times."

"But I have never been to either of these places once," Mrs. Ogilvie said good-temperedly. "You'll have your work cut out, dear, to-morrow in showing me the lions, the window through which Dorothy Vernon escaped to meet her lover——"

"That's a trumped-up story; I don't believe a word of it," Stella interrupted enthusiastically. "She married a Manners! Why should she have run away to marry him?"

"Why, indeed! But girls do foolish things in love and pique at times."

"Ye-es."

"Now, my dear little chatelaine, what do you propose for to-morrow? Shall we take a luncheon hamper with us, or shall we lunch at the Rowsley Inn? I read that it's a lovely one."

"I won't give an order for a hamper; I won't give another order in this place. I've no right to be here; I'm here on sufferance merely. My guardian, poor fellow! must hate the sight of me."

As she spoke she crept across the room, flung herself on her knees by Mrs. Ogilvie's side, and buried her face in that lady's lap.

"I'm so miserable!" she cried. "What have I done that I should be so miserable?"

"You are not miserable, Stella," Mrs. Ogilvie said, determining to speak the cold truth. "You are in a

passion because you cannot adjust life to the angles you are making for yourself. You are a highly-prized girl, and you ought to be a happy one—instead of which you are setting up a fictitious ill-fate for yourself. You are ungrateful to your guardian and to me.”

“No, no, no!” Stella wailed.

“Yes, you are; and you are brutal to Mr. Stanley.”

“What!”

“I said you are brutal to Mr. Stanley, dear, and I meant it. For the last day or two you have been trying to make him feel that you regard yourself, and consider that he regards you, as on a lower social platform than he is on himself. That to a man of his caliber is brutality.”

Stella flushed rosy red with pleasure.

“Do you think he feels—like that?” she asked demurely.

“I am sorry to say I do think it. Now put on your hat and go down to the lake with him.”

“Of course, if you tell me to I must obey you; but I would rather go and have it out with my guardian at once. The longer I put off telling him what I mean to do, the harder the telling will be.”

“Well, my dear child, the statement of your intention won’t take you very long. You have only to say that you are not going to be guided by any one, that you are ambitious of making a name for yourself on the stage, and that you don’t care how much you hurt the feelings of your best friends. You can say it all in two minutes.”

“I’ll say it after luncheon; I’ll go down to the lake now.”

She spoke quite meekly, and when she found Stanley

on the terrace, her mood was so gentle that he hardly knew her.

"I want you to help me make out a program for a trip to-morrow," she began. "See! I have brought a pencil, and we'll jot down our route. I should like to drive all the way. That would be the best plan, wouldn't it?"

"Certainly it would," he agreed promptly.

He had not the faintest idea where she proposed driving to, but when she consulted him with that smile and in that tone of voice, he would have agreed to driving to Jericho with her.

They spent a sunny hour on the lake without a single jar. Once or twice she was on the point of telling him of the scheme that was so important in her own eyes, but a sense of loyalty to her guardian checked her.

"He must be the first to hear of it," she said to herself; and her spirit swelled within her as largely as if the "it" in question had been the fate of nations.

At luncheon the projected driving trip was fully discussed. They were within easy driving distance of Rowsley; for though Castle Errol stood in Cheshire, its grounds and lands stretched far into Derbyshire.

Stella's experience and knowledge of the county came in usefully at this juncture.

"We'll drive to the Peacock at Rowsley and lunch there and bait the horses, and when they are rested we'll go on to Haddon Hall and Chatsworth. It will be a longish drive, so we had better go four-in-hand," Stella suggested. "Those who agree with me hold up their hands."

They all held up their hands, and Stanley asked:

"Who is to drive?"

"Lord St. Errol, of course," Stella said nimbly.

"I never drove a pair of horses in my life, much less four," St. Errol protested. "I should be landing you in the Wye or the Derwent. We had better be contented with a pair, I think, and let the coachman drive."

But this sounded tame after what she had proposed.

"Papa taught me to drive four-in-hand. He thought I handled my horses well. Will you trust me?"

"I had much rather trust you than myself," St. Errol told her.

"I know the horses that must be put together. It will be delicious! Do make haste and finish luncheon and come out to the stables, and I'll show you the horses."

She was so impatient to taste the pleasure of handling four horses again that the scheme which had been dominating her for some time receded into the limbo of forgotten things.

The impetus of her ardent desire carried all before it. St. Errol feared he was doing an unwise thing in agreeing to let her drive four spirited horses over a rough and hilly country. Stanley did not "fear," he "knew" it was an unwise thing, but he would not risk the continuance of the reign of peace which Stella had inaugurated by giving his opinion.

"I hope the horses are very quiet," Mrs. Ogilvie said plaintively.

"Well, they are not exactly lambs, but they have lovely mouths and manners. I understand *them*, and they understand *me*."

"Clever horses!" Stanley said, meeting her merrily defiant glance with a sad one.

CHAPTER XI.

ON THE ROAD.

SLELLA was quite at home in the stables, and the others were well contented to surrender their judgment to hers unquestioningly. This they did as much from ignorance of the matter under deliberation as from the weak desire they all had to defer to and please the girl who felt her forlorn and nameless position so keenly.

“I hope you are all enjoying the prospect of the drive as much as I am,” she said, in a tone that demanded sympathy, when she had decided on the steady-going wheelers and the rather more sprightly leaders.

“I hope that the roads are not *very* hilly, and that the horses are *very* quiet,” Mrs. Ogilvie suggested.

“I could drive over these roads in the dark, I believe; and as for the horses, they know and like me as well as I know and like them,” Stella answered jauntily. Then she ordered out a sober, not too high, waggonette, to be looked over in readiness for the morrow’s excursion, and having made these preparations, she was as gay as a child, and quite forgot the misery and discontent which had been oppressing her of late.

Their intention of going for a drive this same afternoon was frustrated by the arrival of several callers on

Mrs. Ogilvie and her young charge, Miss St. Errol. Hitherto the girl had been so jealously kept apart from social intercourse with the neighborhood that it had fallen into the error of supposing her to be a spoilt young half savage. It was, therefore, with surprise (not in all cases of a pleasant nature) that they found a girl whose previous high culture had enabled her to bring herself up to date in the best acceptation of the phrase during her brief experience of London life.

Among these callers a delightful couple of elderly people called Bentick preeminently pleased Stella. It was evident to every one of the Castle Errol people that they had not come out of curiosity, but out of real courtesy and kindness. They were what they called in that country "quite near neighbors." That is, their house—they did not speak of it as their "place"—was only six miles distant from Castle Errol. Yet they had never passed the precincts of the latter place before this day, for the late Lord St. Errol had reigned there fifty years, and during the whole of that time had kept his nearest neighbors at bay.

But the Benticks were too kind-hearted, too innately tactful and courteous, to dwell upon this fact. They were simply cordial to the newcomers, without casting any reflections upon the one gone by.

"It is good to see so much young life about the place," Mrs. Bentick said, with dear, old ladylike confidence. "We have no children of our own, but we have a very dear nephew, who is with us very often. He has always wished to see youth established here, and now his wish will be gratified. Are your nephews keen sportsmen?"

"They are not my nephews. I never saw or knew

anything about them until Lord St. Errol's lawyer, who is a great friend of mine, asked me to take charge of Lord St. Errol's ward."

"Judging from her frank, sweet good young face, you must find your charge a pleasant one," Mrs. Bentick said, looking so tenderly at the back of Stella's head that the girl was magnetized, apparently, for she looked round and gave a friendly smile to the lady who was discussing her.

"So pleasant that I wish she were my very own daughter, or that I had a son who could make her my daughter-in-law as well as in *love*. But I have no son, and in time I feel that Stella will drift away from me. She will make other ties, she will take up other duties."

"She will never drift away from any one who has loved her and whom she has loved." There was gentle vehemence in the way Mrs. Bentick said this, and Stanley standing near her, heard the words.

"You are right. She is very staunch."

"And she will never be staunch to the wrong person." Mrs. Bentick had her kindest glance bent on Stanley, to whom she intuitively felt it would be well that the girl in whom she had taken a sudden interest should be loyal and staunch.

The Benticks and the people who had come in contemporaneously with them were gone. But others flocked in or straggled in as the case might be until monotony prevailed, especially for Stella. Some of the visitors put leading questions to her about her past life at Errol Castle. Some of them (these were the younger ones) were rather eager in their inquiries as to what she thought when she found her new guardian was such a young man. Others made overtures of sudden friend-

ship towards her. But she remained her little self-possessed self, neither bewildered nor elated.

"That girl has stamina. She will grow into a splendid woman," Mrs. Bentick said to her husband as they drove home.

He nodded assent. "But she'll have sorrow before she does that," he said gravely.

"My dear John, why suggest a gloomy future for that bright young thing—loved, cared for, and protected as she is?"

"I can always say what I mean, but I can't always put what I think into words," he replied. "Love, care, and protection can't avert sorrow if it is to be our portion."

"I wish——" Mrs. Bentick began; then she checked herself, and no more was said about Stella just then.

* * * * *

"We will have breakfast at eight to-morrow, and start directly after it," Stella ordained before they separated that night. "I am sure I shall dream I am handling the reins to-night. You *are* kind, Lord St. Errol, to give me this pleasure."

She said this so gratefully that St. Errol felt as if he could let her drive eight-in-hand had she demanded to do so. But all he said was :

"Kind! Oh, nonsense! It's my duty to give you all the happiness I can. You forget I'm your guardian. But why do you call me 'Lord' St. Errol?"

"Just because I *do* remember that you are my guardian and that I must show you proper respect. Good night, Mrs. Ogilvie." She kissed Mrs. Ogilvie as she spoke. "Good night, all—I am so happy!"

The morning was a glorious autumnal one, the air

crisp, the atmosphere so clear that grim Kindersecht, twenty miles distant, looked quite near. It was all uphill work, as far as the road was concerned, for the first few miles, and the horses under the guidance of those firm little hands went along with blameless steadiness. Then they got into a more undulating country, and on the level the horses began to pull in a way that made Stella's face flush with the strain of keeping them in.

"I'll give them their heads going up the next hill," she said, half looking round at Mrs. Ogilvie, who was trembling in the body of the wagonette.

"Hadn't you better let the coachman take your place for a time, dear? I'm sure you are overtired," said Mrs. Ogilvie.

"Give up the reins? Oh no!" Stella was saying, when the sprightly young leaders made a sudden dash forward, and compelled their more sober-minded brethren behind them to follow suit. "We shall soon be off the level, and there is a nice stiff hill at the end of it which will tone down the spirits of our friends in front."

She explained this to St. Errol, who was by her side, wishing with all his heart that he had entrusted the driving to the trusty skilled old coachman whom he had insisted should accompany them.

"There's a bull standing on that low hedge on the right; I hope he won't bellow as we pass him," he said.

She laughed.

"No fear! We shall pass him too quickly for him to get his bellow out."

The bull, however, rigidly as he stood, was quietly lashing himself into a rage, and as the leaders came abreast of him he gave vent to a brief bellow and stamped his foot.

At this the horses simply flew, and the wagonette rocked from side to side. But Stella proved herself equal to the occasion. She kept them straight, and after giving another mile at what was a heart-sickening and nerve-thrilling pace to Mrs. Ogilvie, they came to the hill she had promised them and subsided into a gentle trot.

"Three or four miles more, and we shall be at Chatsworth," she told them.

"How thankful I shall be to be there! I hope Lord St. Errol will either insist on the coachman driving us home, or else make us all go home by train. I shall for one," Mrs. Ogilvie whispered to Stanley.

"Look at the color left on those hanging woods still, and actually, late as it is, there is heath in the hedges."

Stella called attention to these beauties so rapturously that Mrs. Ogilvie, though she was nearly blind with fear, tried to look at the woods and the hedges, but she saw nothing.

Stella, on the contrary, had eyes for everything.

"We shall pass such a dear old black-and-white farmhouse presently; it's on the Haddon Hall Estate, and they breed a lot of peacocks there. Such lovely snow-white ones, as well as the gorgeous colored ones."

"Why do they breed peacocks, nasty noisy things?" Mrs. Ogilvie asked. She felt it was quite possible that the peacocks might screech and frighten the horses, as the bull had done by his bellow, into running away again.

"A peacock is the crest of the Manners family. We'll put the horses up at Edensor and walk on to Chatsworth; it's only half a mile from Edensor, and I

think we are equal to walking that distance," Stella arranged.

"I shall be thankful to do so," Mrs. Ogilvie confessed, "but I thought we were to put up at The Peacock at Rowsley."

"We are to go there after we have thoroughly done Chatsworth. Not that one can ever thoroughly do Chatsworth, it is so vast, and I wonder if the Duke and Duchess know their way all over it. There is the farmhouse I told you of, and there are four peacocks on the wall."

"Let us trust they will be quiet as we pass," Mrs. Ogilvie murmured, and the trust was rewarded; the peacocks maintained a courteous silence, merely spreading their tails out for the admiration they felt was those tails' due.

As they pulled up at the Edensor Hotel, an open carriage drawn by a sturdy pair of horses, and driven by a man of strikingly aristocratic appearance, moved out of their way, and presently out of this carriage stepped Mr. and Mrs. Bentick.

"If we had known you were coming, and had agreed to meet you here, we couldn't have timed the meeting more opportunely," Mrs. Bentick said delightedly.

"Now that we have met, let us join forces," said Lord St. Errol. "I suppose you are bound for Chatsworth as well as ourselves?"

"That's our bourn. Where is Basil, my dear?"

Mr. Bentick was the speaker, and his wife answered him:

"He has gone to look after the horses; you know he never neglects them."

"We are speaking of my nephew; he arrived unex-

pectedly last night. His regiment is ordered to the front, and he sails in a fortnight for Natal."

Stella's eyes kindled as she listened to this.

"How I wish I knew anything about nursing! I'd go to the front, too, if I did," she said so enthusiastically that Stanley wished the new arrival was off to the front in an hour instead of in a fortnight.

Just then the young soldier came round, joined them, and was formally introduced to the whole party as "My nephew, Basil Bentick," by his adoring uncle.

Then they started for Chatsworth.

CHAPTER XII.

A HAPPY DAY ?

THE two elderly ladies brought up the rear, and Stanley attached himself to them. Naturally, Lord St. Errol and Mr. Bentick, whose estates adjoined each other, walked on together, speaking of the thousand and one things which land-owners always find to talk about. So it fell out that the young soldier who had just been ordered to the front was Stella's escort.

For a minute or two she was disappointed at this arrangement, and looked the chagrin she felt.

Then she reminded herself that Stanley had brought it about by falling behind, and she determined to let him see that she enjoyed the society of the newcomer.

"I suppose you are longing to be off?" she began.

"I am. I applied to go out with the first of our fellows who were to go to the front, but I wasn't lucky enough to be one of those selected. But there'll be a deal more fighting before the affair is over, so I hope to be in the thick of it, after all."

"I understand. I wish I could go, too, as a Red Cross nurse?"

"Do you? You would find the work hard and the scenes heartrending."

"Other women have to do the hard work and face

the heartrending scenes. At any rate, I should be doing some good with my life. At present I am *so* useless—so very, very useless.”

He longed to tell her that her youth and beauty were useful, inasmuch as they gave pleasure to every one who saw her. But she was in a serious mood, far too much in earnest for any man of good taste to utter words that sounded like flattery.”

“Have you ever been in battle, Captain Bentick?”

“I’ve been in some small affairs—what my young brother calls ‘little wars’—but never in anything like this gigantic Transvaal business.”

He did not go on to tell her that in one of those “little wars” of which he spoke so lightly he had so distinguished himself by personal gallantry in the field that he had won the D. S. O.

“I’ve never read a description of a battle that brought it vividly before me until I began reading about this one. Now I almost seem to see what’s going on, don’t you?”

His eyes shot fire as he replied in a low voice :

“I do ; I see it all so vividly that I feel I’d like to face a hundred Boers single-handed this minute, and show them what an Englishman can do when his blood is up at insults offered to our Queen and country.”

“Do you think the Boers will be beaten?” she asked a little timidly.

The ardor of the young soldier seemed to her so grand a thing that she felt quite humble and insignificant beside him.

“They must and shall be beaten. Every Briton—aye, and every Colonial, too—vows that,” he said, with rapid, grim determination. “You should see,” he

went on, "what a grand send-off every regiment gets wherever they start from or embark. Each soldier feels that he carries the heart and the trust of the nation with him."

"I should like to see a send-off," she said eagerly. "What a spirit-stirring scene it must be!"

"It is, on every side. Those who are going, and those who are seeing them go, lash themselves into such a state of enthusiasm as no other scene evokes."

"What regiment are you in?" she asked.

He told her:

"The Eighty —th."

"Where do you sail from?"

"Southampton. I wish it was nearer. Perhaps I might be able to induce you to come and see us off with your friend Mrs. Ogilvie?"

"The distance is nothing. If they—if my guardian, Lord St. Errol, will let me go, Mrs. Ogilvie would take me in a minute. It must be a sight! I feel I must see it!"

"My uncle and aunt are coming to see the send-off, and wish me God-speed. She will cry, I know, yet she wouldn't hold up a finger to keep me back."

"I shouldn't cry, however much I cared," Stella said proudly.

"You ought to be a soldier's daughter."

He had been on the brink of saying a "soldier's wife," but he checked and corrected himself just in time. Perhaps she guessed this, for her fair little face flushed deeply, and it was with an air of relief that she said:

"The entrance is lovely, isn't it? We will wait for your aunt and Mrs. Ogilvie. I want to hear what Mrs.

Ogilvie will say when she gets into the conservatory. Of course, you know it well?"

"Yes, I know it well," he said absently; and then the others came up, and the whole party went through the beautiful iron gates together, and found themselves within the precincts of the Palace of the Peak.

To every one who has seen Chatsworth any description of its magnificence would read tame and guide-booky. To every one who has not seen the superb structure, and the priceless works of art and beauty it contains, an attempt to give a word-picture of them would read like a ridiculous bit of romance. Like Cleopatra, Chatsworth "baffles all description."

Stella, to whom the place was perfectly familiar, walked through it as one in a dream that day. She saw nothing, or, rather, she saw nothing with understanding or interest. Her thoughts were divided between Stanley and the glory and havoc of war.

It hurt her that Stanley should resolutely avoid her as he did. At the same time, she had a faint and undefined sensation of gratification about the cause of that avoidance. It was jealousy, she felt intuitively. Painful as his studied coldness was to her, the pain was lessened by the feeling that he cared enough for her to be jealous without any cause whatever.

When they got out into the gardens, however, Stella could bear the seeming estrangement between herself and one of her earliest friends no longer. She took advantage of the others being engrossed with some one of the innumerable wonders of the place to call Stanley's attention to something else, and when he paused reluctantly by her, she looked him full in the face, and in her usual direct way said:

"Why are you angry with me, Mr. Stanley?"

"I am not angry with you. I have no right to be angry with you."

"Then why are you so cool to me?"

"I have no intention of being cool, either."

"But you are," she went on, with maddeningly sweet persistence, "and why? Tell me why?"

"I admit that I am not a very genial companion to any one to-day. The fact is, I am self-absorbed; I am trying to solve a problem that is of importance, at least, to myself."

"Will you tell me what it is?" she asked insinuatingly.

"You will think it a very trivial one. It is merely that I am trying to decide how and when I shall tell St. Errol that I mean to go out to the Transvaal as war-correspondent if I can find a journal with sufficient confidence in me to give me the billet."

"How strange!"

"What is strange? That I should think of doing real work, instead of sitting down supinely, and acting as if I had as much right to all the luxury and state of Errol Castle as St. Errol himself?"

"No, not that! but strange that you and I should have been thinking of doing exactly the same thing."

"Why, are you thinking of going out as war-correspondent?" asked Stanley of Miss St. Errol.

"No, but wishing, oh, so fervently! that I could go out and help to nurse the wounded."

His face grew dark in a moment.

"So," he thought, "her versatile fancy has been caught by this gay and debonair young soldier already? I knew it would be."

“Captain Bentick says I can’t realize what hard work it is, and how heartrending some of the scenes are. But other women go through them without flinching. Don’t you think I have stamina enough to do it ?”

“Don’t ask me,” he said huskily. “I dare not offer an opinion.”

He turned away coldly, she thought, but as a matter of fact because the thought of this dainty fairy-queen in the midst of scenes of carnage and danger was wringing tears of blood from his heart.

“Walk back with me to Edensor, and tell me all about it. What has made you think of going so suddenly ? I envy you, because you are a man, and can do as you like, and go when and where you like. But—how my guardian will miss you !”

“He’s a free agent, and a clever fellow. He would get on to almost any journal, and go to the front as war-correspondent. It would be a good thing for him. Action would put that pretty Mrs. Clifford out of his head.”

She looked up at him quickly.

“You think that ?” she asked.

“I do.”

“Then you are one who holds that absence makes the heart grow fonder—of some one else ?”

She asked the question as if it hurt her to ask it, as if there were pain for her in the possibility of his lightly estimating the power and influence of love.

“No, Miss St. Errol ; I am not one of that kind. But I think that in a perfectly hopeless case like St. Errol’s *action* is invaluable. He’s the very soul of honor, and despises himself for letting his mind dwell on the pitiful ‘might have been.’ In fact, he knows

his weakness, and if he will take a word of counsel from me, he'll take that best of all tonics—wholesome, hearty, earnest *action*."

"Dear Lord St. Errol! my dear, kind guardian! I do hope that you will be able to persuade him to go with you. I shall feel ever so much happier about you both if you're together—and I'll take care of Jock."

"Then Jock will be a happy, well-cared for dog."

"I hope Alp and Adonis won't get jealous of him, because they are the oldest friends, and so the dearest. One may be very nice to a new friend without being disloyal to an old friend, mayn't one?"

"Oh, certainly," he said heartily.

Nevertheless, he hoped that she would not walk back to Edensor with Captain Bentick.

Nor did she. She clung on to Mrs. Ogilvie, on the pretense of helping that dear lady, who did not require any aid at all, save that of a stout stick, but who, with loving womanly tact, made out that Stella was essential to her.

"Have you enjoyed it?" Stella asked with affectionate solicitude as they walked back through the exquisitely-ordered grounds. "Has it come up to your expectations? Very few things do; but has the real Chatsworth come up to your ideal?"

"It has exceeded it!"

"What a contented woman you are! What a happy life you must have had!"

Stella spoke pettishly.

"On the whole, as happy a one as any human being has a right to expect. But I have had many a sorrow, and they have made me so pitiful to the sorrows of others—real or imaginary,"

"Tell me of them. Can you, or will it hurt you too much to speak of them? I couldn't bear to see you break down."

"I'll spare you that sight. I will give you some lines I wrote many years ago, when the greatest sorrow of my life fell upon me. I brought a copy of them with me this morning, for I had an instinct that you would discuss your grievance, sorrow—call it what you will—with me."

Stella grasped the little page eagerly.

"Why, they're printed!"

"Yes, they were published in the *Temple Bar* magazine. Read them quietly, Stella: they speak for themselves."

These lines are what Stella read:

"THE PAGES OF THE PAST.

"In the volume of my memory I hold those chapters dearly
Wherein names I've loved and cherished are inscribed
from first to last,

And I never read those chapters very audibly or clearly,
For my heart beats all too quickly o'er these pages of the
past.

"Here's the little dog who bit me in a fit of puppy gladness,
In those days of early childhood when that little dog was
dear;

To my grief he fell a victim to parental dread of madness,
Still his tragic fate demands from me the tribute of a
tear.

"Here's my little schoolboy lover, with his water-spaniel
Rover,

Astride his pony Fidget, with his satchel-bag of green;
Did I love the dog and pony best, or really love the lover?
Why ask? He died in India in the service of the Queen.

- “Here’s a later-on edition of the same eternal story
Of a wooing and a winning, of a parting and a vow,
Of a woman’s truth in absence, of a love renounced for
glory—
Of such pain and truth and tenderness, I marvel at it
now.
- “Here’s another buried treasure—my own faith in human
kindness,
It died hardly, I remember, but die it did at last ;
I clung to it with passion, and I wept its loss to blindness ;
I view its grave with sorrow in these pages of the past.
- “Here the parents who departed, full of faith and years and
honor,
Here the gallant sailor brother, lost at sea in manhood’s
prime,
Here the little sons who left me to return to God the Donor,
In safety through Eternity while I’m wearying through
time.”

CHAPTER XIII.

“AM I UGLY?”

MRS. OGILVIE knew the girl she had to deal with. She knew, without looking at Stella, that the sensitive, excitable girl, who five minutes before had been bewailing herself and her fate, was now forgetful of both these, and was trembling with sympathy for the sorrows which Mrs. Ogilvie had never advertised, or in any way thrust forward. So silence was permitted to reign for a few minutes.

But when they came up to the Edensor Hotel, Stella came out of her tame and gentle mood with a spring of such mental vigor that Mrs. Ogilvie realized how entirely the softening influence of her self-revelation had faded for the time from the mind of the impressionable girl.

“The horses will pull a bit at starting. When their heads are turned towards Rowsley, they want to be ‘there’ at once. That’s where papa and I used always to bait them, and they never forget it.”

She spoke so happily, and with such a profound conviction in her old friend’s enjoyment of the prospect being as keen as her own, that Mrs. Ogilvie had not the heart to damp her pleasure by saying how infinitely she would prefer going back by train. But she

did suggest that the coachman should occupy Lord St. Errol's seat on the homeward journey.

"You see, he knows the horses well, and is, of course, skilful as well as strong. So, in case of their becoming frightened by another bull, I hope you'll approve of my proposal, and agree to it."

Stella shook her head.

"I should feel as if none of you had any confidence in me if that arrangement were carried out, and if I had the coachman up with me in the box I should have no one to talk to, and should be turning round every minute to one of you"—determinately. Then she added coaxingly, as the horses were led out and put to: "See! are they not beauties? They're full of gentleness, and you'll be the first to say by-and-by that you have never enjoyed a drive so much in your life."

"I think I have felt more at ease behind Puck."

Mrs. Ogilvie smiled as she said it, and Stella took it for granted that the smile expressed absolute reassurance and confidence.

There were a few brief farewells exchanged between the two parties, who were all to meet again for luncheon at the Rowsley Inn, and then the four-in-hand started gaily, with the Benticks a short distance in the rear.

The horses justified all Stella's prognostications and expectations. They did pull a bit at starting, but they soon settled down to a steady trot that promised well for those who sat behind them. Stella was beginning to give Lord St. Errol a good deal of information about Captain Bentick's plans and prospects in the immediate future, when St. Errol interrupted her by saying:

"I wish that fellow would keep on one side of the road or the other; he'll be into us."

The prophecy proved too sadly correct. A bicyclist, with the dash and courage of an ignorant novice, who had been scorching down the hill a moment or two before, dashed across the road—having quite lost control of his steel steed—right against the leaders' fore-legs. The horses rushed up a bank on the near side, followed by the wagonette, which overturned in a flash, and the whole party—host, guests, servants, horses, and the unhappy cause of the mischief—were lying in a shapeless, helpless mass in the road.

Stanley was the first to extricate himself. He felt bruised and numbed on his right side, but his head was clear. As he rushed to the leaders' heads, he called out :

"Pull the ladies out, St. Errol ; then come and help."

"I am not hurt," Mrs. Ogilvie cried out, her leading characteristic, that of unfailing unselfishness, asserting itself at this crucial moment. "See to Stella ! See to Stella !"

As every one got clear of the débris, and St. Errol lifted Stella, whom a blow on the head had rendered unconscious, out of danger, Stanley, whose right arm was broken, staggered and let go his hold of the horses' heads. In an instant they dashed away, dragging their ruins after them, and firing a parting but unintentional kick at Stanley as they went.

"Is she killed?" he contrived to gasp out, as he dragged himself to the spot where Stella was lying. "My darling!"—he could say no more, but Stella's eyes opened as he said it, and as in a dream she heard the words that were the last he uttered before he lapsed into unconsciousness.

The Benticks were on the spot very soon after this

dramatic scene, which has taken long to describe, but which passed like a flash of lightning in reality.

Then it was discovered that none of them had received any injury besides several bruises and a severe shaking, with the exception of Stanley. Even the unfortunate and awkward cause of the mischief had come out scatheless from the fray, though his bike was rent and smashed into fragments. But Stella remained dazed, trembling, and unable to speak for many hours, while Stanley was suffering from concussion of the brain, as well as from a dislocated elbow and a compound fracture of the forearm.

It was high noon on the following day before Stella woke from a long, restful sleep with her memory partially restored and her active brain trying to assert itself. In a moment Mrs. Ogilvie was by her side, a finger on her lips, and all traces of the terrible anxiety she had been enduring banished from her face.

But in spite of the signal for silence, and in spite of the deadly feeling of sickness that overpowered her as memory came, Stella would ask, "Have I murdered any one? How can you bear to touch me or to look at me?" she said, making an effort to rise up, but the weakness engendered by the shock and sleeping-draughts sent her back among her pillows feeble and panting.

"There is no one killed," Mrs. Ogilvie said, forcing herself to speak much more cheerfully than she felt. "Lord St. Errol is out shooting. Mr. Stanley is in the library"—she did not add that Stanley had been carried in and laid upon a quickly improvised bed until the doctors could set his dislocated and fractured limb, and that he had not been able to be moved yet—"I am

here, as you see, right well and hearty. The coachman is going to drive me out this afternoon, if you're a good child and will keep quiet and let me go."

Stella put a weak little hand up to her head.

"And the horses?"

Mrs. Ogilvie had the courage of good-breeding and unselfishness, but she could not string herself up to the point of telling Stella that one of the leaders had broken his leg, and had been shot.

"Make haste and get well and go to the stable and see the horses for yourself. Now you must take this."

The maid came to her young mistress's bedside at the moment with a cup of tea, which Stella took obediently. She was a long time about it, dipping fingers of dry toast into it, which, when they were cool enough, she handed to Jock, who sat shivering with a fox terrier's sensitive sympathy on her bed. She was evidently thinking deeply, for when she handed back her empty cup, she said:

"I can go and see Mr. Stanley in the library, though I'm not well enough to go and see the horses yet."

"As soon as you are well enough you shall see Mr. Stanley. But you wouldn't like to see any one till the cuts and bruises on your face are healed."

"Am I disfigured for life?" Stella asked piteously.

"Not anything so dreadful as that, dear child. But you have two very black eyes in place of your pretty blue ones, and your nose is cut and swollen. When the carriage upset," she went on slowly, "you rose to try and get command over the poor frightened horses, so you were thrown out with more violence than those who were sitting down. You fell on your face——"

“And I’m ugly, I’m ugly, and no one will ever care for me,” Stella moaned.

Then again, as in a dream, she heard those words, “My darling!” and half quieted by the lyric sound, she subsided into a dreamless slumber, undisturbed by black eyes, a swollen nose, or any other of the paltry considerations which had been weighing heavily on her of late.

“If Miss St. Errol wakes while I am out, and wants to go down-stairs, you are on no account to allow her to do so,” Mrs. Ogilvie instructed Stella’s maid, as she (Mrs. Ogilvie) came into Stella’s room prepared for the afternoon drive.

“Miss St. Errol always does as she likes, ma’am,” the maid replied rather doggedly.

She was fond of her mistress—in a way. But she resented the idea of any one having influence over that young mistress but herself.

“Miss St. Errol must not do what she likes until she is well enough to know what is best for her. But perhaps it will be well if Mrs. Millett comes up and helps you to take charge. She has known Miss St. Errol since she was a baby, and you need help with a patient in such an extremely critical state.”

Mrs. Ogilvie spoke so calmly and kindly, but withal with such decision, that the maid was disarmed as far as verbal warfare went. But she felt herself to be a deeply-injured woman entitled to revenge when she sat down near Miss St. Errol’s bed to await the coming of the unwanted housekeeper.

In fact, she constituted herself a vigilance committee, and resolved to make herself as disagreeable as she could

in the interests of her “young lady” and herself, but chiefly of the latter.

The afternoon—a dull November afternoon—was well advanced when Stella woke again. There was little light in the room, for the fire was screened off. But there was still light enough left in the sky to show the girl that branches of impatient trees were waving across her uncurtained windows.

They looked weird and uncanny in the fading light. They seemed to tear and scratch at the window-panes, as if they longed to get out and worry her with their clawlike twigs. Presently she remembered enough of the events of the last few hours to call to mind where she was and a little of what had happened.

She sat up in her bed and took hasty notes of her surroundings. Her maid was sound asleep in a chair at the corner of the screen. Mrs. Millett had been summoned by important household needs, and was absent from her post as watcher-in-chief.

Stella stumbled out of bed and into slippers and a dressing-wrap. Haltingly, but with all the speed she could muster, she steered her faltering frame down-stairs to the library.

As she tottered forward, a man—she did not know that it was one of the doctors in attendance on Mr. Stanley—rose, caught her in his arms, and carried her back to the hall.

“You are mad to do this,” he said softly; “your appearance might kill him.”

“Am I so ugly?” she sobbed, and then she remembered nothing more for many more days, that were weary ones for those who watched her.

Mr. Clifford was alone in his handsomely and artistically-furnished bachelor quarters—quarters that he could not look upon with pleasure this day, in spite of the fine taste he had in furniture and decoration. He was realizing in bitterness of spirit that he would soon have to leave them, for, as he expressed it, “he had come to the end of his tether,” as out of what had once been a handsome property a bare pittance remained. He was sick, and sore, and sorry, and sad—sad with a sadness that enveloped him like a thick fog, and made him feel remorseful for the way he had treated his wife.

He turned away with a feeling of nausea from the light invalid breakfast his man had just brought in, and sat for another hour brooding over the fire, leaving the breakfast untasted. Then he rang, and peevishly complained that it was cold.

After a time he went to his writing-table, and scrawled a brief note. He was very ill and weak; the least exertion made his hand tremble. When he had sent it off, he sat down and began to brood again; but reflection only serving to deepen his depression, he picked up a sporting paper, and began to study the Geisha's chances in a big race that was to be run that same day.

“I wish I hadn't put all I'm worth on the brute,” he muttered. “Vixen was right, I believe, after all, about the French horse, only I do hate women interfering and giving their advice at every turn.”

As he murmured the last words there came a brisk knock at the door, and before he could answer it a woman in a handsome walking dress came into the room—a fine, tall, handsome, determined, almost bold-looking woman, who evidently was not suffering from

depression, and who looked the embodiment of satisfied prosperity.

"How are you, Jem? Better to-day, I hope?" she asked, giving him her hand.

He still held it while he replied:

"No worse. The only thing that is keeping me up is the hope that the Geisha will be a winner."

"She won't—you take my word for that. You haven't plunged on her, have you?"

He nodded assent.

"Oh, Jem, Jem, how very foolish of you! With all my heart I hope the mare may come in first, and with all my fears I dread the French horse will."

"Luck can't be so against me as *that*. It would be the last blow if it is."

"You have said that about so many things during the eight years I have known you. The many 'last blows' you have had would have knocked down a Hercules or a Sandow."

"Don't be frivolous about it, Vixen. I'm really on my last legs now. What grieves me is that I shall no longer be able to give you the diamonds and other things that your womanly heart delights in."

"But I have got them all, and can give them back to you in your hour of need."

"Do you think I should be such a cad as to take back the jewels I have given you?" he said, and a frightfully red spot burnt on either cheek as he said it. "I've wasted eight years of your life in persuading you to consider yourself engaged to marry me—if ever I got free of my wife."

She flushed as he said this, and her face and voice were agitated as she replied:

“There will be nothing caddish in your taking what I have always regarded as presents from a man who considered himself engaged to me, and who would marry me when he could. You know,” she went on with repressed passion, “that for four or five years I thought you were a single man, and that it was only your fear of offending your ‘people’ that prevented your marrying me instead of dragging on the wretched engagement. When I discovered that you had a wife, I still believed you when you said she was going to divorce and set you free. It was a revelation to me—an awful one—when I found that our engagement was a farce, and that you have *never* had the possibility of making me your wife before you——”

“What is this leading up to ?” he asked, with a sneer.

“This,” she said quietly—“that the farce must be ended soon. I have held the jewelry and lace you have given me ‘in trust’ only. I only took them because I knew if I had not done so some one more unscrupulous would have despoiled you of them.”

“You have something more than this to say, Vixen ?”

“I have.”

CHAPTER XIV.

A PARTING.

“OUT with it, Vixen ! I’m sure it’s something unpleasant. But it doesn’t much matter. When a man is utterly crushed, fate and fortune may batter away at him as much as they like ; he can’t suffer more.”

He spoke harshly and peevishly, but she did not resent his tone. On the contrary, there was an unwonted expression of gentleness in her eyes as she said :

“ Poor Jem ! I am afraid you will suffer more when I tell you that yesterday I had an offer of marriage from a man I sincerely respect, and—I accepted it.”

“ Vixen ! ”

“ Do, do be generous, and say you wish me to be happy, Jem ! I have surely been a very patient woman.”

She moved a step nearer to him and took his hand. He snatched it from her and waved her away.

“ Jilted ! after all these years ! ”

“ Don’t be hard, Jem. ‘ All these years ’ have been sad for me too.”

“ Rats leave a sinking ship ! ” he snarled.

“ I have gone through a good deal ; don’t be hard on me because at last I give up a forlorn hope. I have been misunderstood and held to be guilty while I have

been innocent. That's a bitter trial to a woman, Jem. Let us part friends."

Again she held her hand out to him, and again he repulsed her.

"Go! I will not even ask the name of the man you are going to marry. I am dying—I know it. The only solace left to me in life was some hours of your society every day. Now you deprive me of that."

"Forgive me," she said, with the humility of a loving woman.

It did not occur to her to blame him for the waste he had made of so many years. She asked for his forgiveness as meekly as if she had been the selfish deceiver in the case.

"Go!" was all he said; and she went away with an aching heart.

As she went his man came back with an answer to the note Clifford had sent to Madame Dalma's agent. It merely contained Dalma's address in New York, which was what Mr. Clifford had asked for. Without delay he wrote to her as follows:

"I am dying alone and in poverty. Forgive me, and come back to me.

"Your husband,

"JAMES CLIFFORD."

"She'll feel it to be her 'duty' to nurse me and support me, and she has a strong sense of duty," he said grimly to himself; "and I suppose Vixen will feel it to be *her* duty to cast me adrift altogether. Women are heartless, and no mistake."

Perhaps if he could have seen Vixen, whose real name was Violet Calstock, as she packed up the diamonds

and pearls he had given her, while she believed herself to be honorably engaged to him, he would not have denounced her as "heartless." The tears that she rained upon them were not for the jewels she was parting with, but for her lost faith, her broken trust in, and her utter severance from, the man she had so long and loyally loved.

"I'm glad I've never been tempted to part with one of them, however badly I have wanted ready money," she said to herself, as she locked the jewels up. "At any rate, poor fellow! he will never know want, even though the Geisha is not a winner."

Distinctly Vixen was not heartless.

When Mr. Clifford received the jewel-case, he could not resist the feeling of satisfaction which the sight of their contents gave him. He tried to lash himself into a rage at her "callousness" in returning what had been given as love-tokens; but he failed to do it. The substantial comfort which he would derive from the proceeds of their sale flashed across his mental vision, and made him look leniently upon the conduct of the woman who was befriending him. He was even magnanimous enough to hope that the fellow she was going to marry would be "as generous to her as I have been."

* * * * *

Mrs. Ogilvie, who had never done anything that was not open and aboveboard in all her previous life, was turning out a wily diplomatist now. Her chief object was to prevent Stella seeing Stanley. In the girl's overwrought physical and mental condition, the sight of poor Stanley, shattered as he was, would, Mrs. Ogilvie felt, have a fatal effect upon the girl who blamed herself for the catastrophe. Accordingly, every mirror and

handglass were removed from Stella's room, and the harmless delusion was fostered in the girl's mind that she was disfigured—for a time only—to such an extent that she could not be allowed to see her own face just yet, much less let any one else gaze upon it.

As a matter of fact, Stella had a slight discoloration under one eye and a cut across her nose; beyond this she was not damaged visibly. But the shock to her nerves and system generally had been so severe that her friend Mrs. Ogilvie and her guardian both felt they dared not run the risk of letting her see Stanley. So she was kept a kindly-treated prisoner in her own rooms while Stanley was being doctored and nursed through a crisis in his life.

The broken arm and dislocated elbow were not the worst of his injuries. In giving him a kick at breaking away—quite unintentional it was—one of the leaders had struck him on the right temple and damaged his eye. The eye had been operated on, but it was a grave question whether it would ever be useful to its owner again or not, and in the meantime a black patch and a darkened room were the conditions under which he was lying alive, mentally clear and alert, physically darkened and wretched.

Stella's system had been so thoroughly shaken by the shock of the accident and the alarm consequent upon it which she had felt for her companions, that a fortnight had passed before weakness released her from its thrall. By this time she was allowed the free use of as many looking-glasses as she liked, and her delight was as fresh and outspoken as a child's when she saw that she "was not ugly." Indeed, there was not a scar to tell the tale of the cuts she had been given by the

hard, heartless road when she had been hurled upon it. Her delicate little nose had received merely a skin scratch, and what they had feared would be a permanent mark on her brow had vanished out of sight altogether.

But if her delight at her restoration to good looks was as frank as a child's, the intensity of her happiness when she was told she might see Stanley made her reticent and almost timid.

He was better—indeed, almost himself again—by this time, but his arm was still in a sling, and he wore an ominous-looking black patch over one eye. His spirits, however, were good, in spite of his not having been able to do any work since that unlucky day of the four-in-hand drive.

Every writer, more especially those who are dependent on their pens for their bread-and-butter and independence, knows how agonizingly wearing these periods of enforced inactivity are. With perhaps as much mental vigor as has ever been their portion, and with a brain teeming with thoughts that they feel are the best they ever had, it is hard to lie prone and helpless, unable to use that mental force, unable to put these thoughts to paper.

Still, his spirits were good, for one of the first oculists (summoned from London by St. Errol) had told him to-day that his sight in the injured eye was not permanently destroyed. The surgeons, too, assured him that “in a short time he would have the full, strong use of his right arm again.” Altogether, his mood was a happy one compared to what it had been recently, and he looked forward with keen delight to meeting Miss St. Errol at luncheon.

"Mrs. Ogilvie and I have had a difficult game to play," St. Errol explained to Stanley. "Poor Stella was a good deal knocked about herself when we came to grief that day. The first words she spoke when she recovered consciousness were, 'Have I murdered any one?' When she was told no, she hadn't, she proceeded to make inquiries in detail about each one of us. Mrs. Ogilvie made the best of everything, but Stella grew suspicious when she heard I was shooting, and you were not with me."

"Suspicious! Of what?" Stanley asked.

"Of your being hurt. So as soon as Mrs. Ogilvie's back was turned, she slipped out of bed and down to the library to see how things were going. It would have killed her to see you as you were then, so Dr. Leonard promptly caught her up and carried her to bed again."

"Miss St. Errol is very sensitive; she has a feeling heart for every living thing, I believe," Stanley said warmly.

"Well, I won't go quite so far as that, but she certainly has a very feeling heart for any one to whom she takes a liking."

"Yes; see how she pets Jock. She doesn't pet him foolishly, as some women do their dogs, but she makes him quite a little friend. Fancy that girl thinking of either going on the stage or as a hospital nurse! You must put a stop to her doing the latter, at any rate, St. Errol. If you felt that the sight of a slight accident like mine would have killed her, how would she bear the sight of hundreds of wounded and dying?"

St. Errol was too loyal to his young ward to explain the reasons he had for thinking that the sight of Stan-

ley injured and suffering would try her more severely than the sight of the injuries and sufferings of others.

“If her heart and her mind are set upon doing either, I shall not thwart her. But I hope, instead of her doing either, that I may soon be called upon to give my permission for her to marry some downright good fellow, who will prize and take care of our dear little sensitive plant.”

“He means Bentick, of course,” Stanley thought ; and his mood became as dark and dreary as the December day through which they were living.

* * * * *

“Don’t let us have any delay. Directly Stella comes down let us go in to luncheon,” St. Errol had said to Mrs. Ogilvie.

He had a manly horror of a scene or anything approaching a scene in private life, and he greatly feared that the sight of Stanley’s slinged arm and patched eye would make Stella emotional. But he need not have feared. Stella had nerved herself to bear stoically any trial to her feelings. It had been borne in upon her, though no one had breathed a word to her on the subject, that Stanley had been seriously hurt, and she steeled herself to bear the sight of the consequences of what she persisted in thinking was her fault.

She knew also that there would be another call made upon her endurance that day. Mrs. Bentick, who had called regularly every day since the accident, always accompanied by her nephew, to inquire for the sick and wounded, had written a note to Stella this day which had slightly startled her. On the face of it there was nothing alarming in it. She (Mrs. Bentick) merely said :

“We are delighting in the prospect of seeing you to-day. Mrs. Ogilvie tells me you will be down and see us. I hope you will be glad to hear that our nephew Basil’s regiment does not sail for another fortnight. I trust by the time he gets to Cape Town this bloody and protracted struggle will be over, but I dare not say this to him.”

Stella felt vaguely uneasy as she read this, and her uneasiness increased as the hours went on. She was pleased that the Bentick family had taken such an evident liking to her. At the same time she felt that Mr. Stanley would not rejoice in the fact when it was made manifest to him. That she and Captain Bentick had been attracted towards each other during their brief intercourse was clear. It was equally clear to her now that Mr. Stanley had been unsympathetic with that attraction. She always clearly remembered that Stanley had said “My darling” to her just before she lapsed into a weird world of unconsciousness and dreams.

She was quite self-possessed, though, when she walked into the anteroom where the others had already assembled, and restrained all expression of surprise at Stanley’s appearance, whatever she might have felt.

“You’re a little fraud, Stella,” St. Errol said as, after they had all greeted her, he led her into the adjacent dining-room.

Her thoughts flew back to the accident of which she would hold herself guilty at once, and the pink tint in her face deepened to scarlet as she asked :

“How ? You mean I——”

“I mean you came down looking like a rose in June instead of like the lily I was half fearing to see after your fortnight in bed.”

"I don't feel a bit like looking a lily ; my face is burning now. I suppose it's the exertion of coming down after staying in bed like a sluggard for a fortnight." She stole a shy glance at Stanley as she spoke, and then strung herself up to say : " I feel that I have shown a sad lack of courage and energy, Mr. Stanley. I gave up and let myself be nursed and coddled, when there was nothing the matter but a shaking, which I well deserved ; while *you* are about with a——"

She stopped with a little choke in her throat, and he hastened to assure her that he " should be all right in a day or two."

" I think a short drive would do Stella good this afternoon," Mrs. Ogilvie said, addressing St. Errol with her usual desire to avert observation from other people's confusion.

" I am sure it would," St. Errol said heartily ; and then Stella flushed scarlet again as she remembered Mrs. Bentick's note and promised visit that afternoon.

" I can't go out this afternoon—I mean, I don't think I ought to go out," she said, with much embarrassment.

" My dear child, why not ? It would do you a great deal of good. You are used to such an open-air life that a drive will be the best doctor and medicine that you can have after having been cooped up so long."

" But, Mrs. Ogilvie," Stella stammered out, for she felt that Stanley was looking at her with his one unharmed eye, " I don't think it would be polite of me to go. I have had a note from Mrs. Bentick, and she says she wants to see me this afternoon when she calls."

" Then you must stay at home to receive her," Mrs. Ogilvie said cheerily. " Still, you must have fresh air ;

so, as I have many letters to write, I will ask you young people to take a stroll in the grounds without me."

"I am so sorry, but I have promised my steward to ride round with him and look at some of the outlying cottage property. You must excuse me, Stella. I know Stanley and Jock will take care of you. You do want to be out in the open again, and no mistake. You've turned quite white; you're the 'lily' now I dreaded seeing."

"Oh, *don't*, please!" Stella pleaded.

The prospect of a stroll through the grounds alone with Stanley made her feel faint. Was it joy or was it pain, or was it both together? She could not have answered that question satisfactorily.

Presently Mrs. Ogilvie went off to write her letters, St. Errol went away to his outlying property, and Stella and Stanley started for their stroll.

It thrilled him to the bone when she insisted in helping him on with his overcoat, and when she laid a hand light as a snowflake on his arm, and said, "This is my doing," he nearly broke down; but he controlled himself, and Jock came and created a diversion.

"Let us go down to the Kingdom of Chrysanthemums," he suggested; and they went to it, and there recalled the little events of the last time they were there, the evening before the drive to Chatsworth.

They spent an hour there, and were happy with the half-fearful, furtive happiness of people who love and are not sure of being loved in return.

He had almost resolved upon putting his fate to the touch, when a servant approached them, hastily saying, "Mrs. Bentick to see you, miss," and Stanley's opportunity was gone.

CHAPTER XV.

A FATAL INTERRUPTION.

WITH the servant close by and the Benticks waiting for her in the house, it was impossible for Stanley to put that question which had been burning on his lips a moment before. As she lingered for a few seconds after the servant had left, Stanley raised his hat with haughty politeness, and said as he turned away :

“I must not keep you from your friends, Miss St. Errol.”

“But you’ll come in with me, surely? They have come to inquire for you just as much as for me.”

She spoke so pleadingly that his pride, which had been in arms, lowered its sword so far as to enable him to say :

“I’ll walk back to the castle with you, but I would rather not see strangers to-day.”

She slackened her pace when he said it, and made it obvious that she was not unduly eager to leave him in order to greet the recent arrivals.

They sauntered on quite slowly for about ten minutes, and he was beginning to feel that her new friends had certainly not weakened her interest in, and regard for, himself—interest and regard which at first she had shown as freely for him as for her guardian.

As this comforting conviction grew within him, he stole a glance at her with his uninjured eye, and as he did so her face grew rosy and radiant, and she went forward with a quicker step. Looking in the direction of her gaze, he saw Mrs. Bentick and her nephew Basil coming to meet them, and again Stanley's heart fell, and his soul was submerged in the waters of bitterness.

He remained just long enough to meet them and thank them for their kind inquiries, and then, with a brief apology, he turned back on his path and went down to the lake alone.

He was haunted all the time by the thought of that radiant look of pleasure which had flashed into her face when she saw the young soldier coming towards them. It did not occur that the pleasure was caused quite as much by the presence of the young soldier's aunt as by his own. So he wandered round the lake, which looked dreary enough now under the December sky, and thought of that day not so very long ago when he had rowed her about on it and gathered water-lilies.

Meantime, Mrs. Bentick, who was very much in the confidence of her ardent, impulsive nephew, had contrived, in the easiest and most natural way in the world, to go and seek Mrs. Ogilvie in the room in which the latter always wrote her letters.

The intimacy between the two ladies had ripened rapidly during the last fortnight, so Stella had no excuse for offering to accompany her when she said quietly :

"I have a little bit of business about the Christmas parish treats and entertainments to speak about to Mrs. Ogilvie, so I'll go to her, if you will allow me."

"O yes, do," Stella answered ; but at the same time

she felt that she would rather not have been left alone with Captain Bentick.

"I expected to hear you had gone before now," she began, and it was an unfortunate beginning.

"I'm anxious enough to be off, but now there's another delay of ten days or a fortnight before the transport we're to sail in is ready. However, I can't grumble, for the delay has enabled me to see you again."

"That's poor compensation for being kept back."

"It's the best compensation I could have. I've been here every day in the hope of seeing you, and day after day I have been disappointed. I dared not write, because——" He did not say "because he feared his fate too much," but she knew what he meant, and suffered agonies of embarrassment in the knowledge.

"I wonder that every one who was in the wagonette that dreadful day doesn't hate me. See what my obstinacy has done for poor Mr. Stanley," she went on hurriedly.

"Oh, he's all right," Captain Bentick said, with the indifference most men feel and express for mere physical pain. If he had been obliged to nurse Stanley, he would have done it with all conceivable gentleness and care. But he was not going to express pity or soft sympathy for a broken arm or a damaged eye. "It's all the fortune of war, you know," he went on. "Will you be a little interested in me when I go to the front?"

"Of course I shall be."

"Then I shall go with a very light heart. Don't think me awfully brusque and abrupt, and don't laugh at me when I tell you I came here to-day to ask for something more than your interest. I'm only a rough soldier, accustomed to go straight to the point."

“But you don’t know me?”

“I love you ! I couldn’t love you more if I had known you a dozen years ! Give me hope ! Let me come again to-morrow. Let me come again,” he repeated, with the fervor of a young man very much in love, pleading so gallantly, with such chivalrous delicacy, that Stella wavered.

“I—my guardian——” she began, and then she paused, for the mention of her guardian brought Stanley vividly before her.

“He may well look higher for you—I know you are worthy of a far higher place than I can offer you—but no fellow will ever love you better, or strive harder to win your love. Give me a word of hope !”

His handsome, earnest face, his ardor and impulsive-ness, his gallant bearing, his evident intensity, and the reality of the emotion he so hardly repressed, overcame her. After all, why should she not let herself be loved ? Why should she let a feeling reign over her for a man who did not reciprocate it ?

“Come again,” was all she said, but it was enough for Basil Bentick. He bent his head to her hands and kissed them, and she did not resent the endearment.

The two elder ladies came back presently, not so much absorbed in the plans they had been making for the amuse-ment and instruction of the parish as not to be alive to the young human interest in the scene on which they intruded. The actors were so young, so transparent, and one of them was so buoyantly triumphant in the way he had played his part, that it looked for a moment as if there would be an explanatory burst of fireworks.

His aunt averted this by saying, “Come, Basil, we

have already kept Mrs. Ogilvie too long from her drive. Dear Miss St. Errol, my husband hopes he may be allowed to call on you soon. He is, or has been, a fine horseman and whip, and the skill and courage you displayed have quite won his heart. He begs that you will accept an old man's homage."

"I don't deserve it," Stella said almost humbly.

There was nothing deceitful, or even secreteive, about Stella. As soon as their visitors were gone—Captain Bentick's long lingering glance at Stella as he turned for one last look before leaving the room would have betrayed his love and hopes to any one not wilfully blind—she began her confession.

"Oh, Mrs. Ogilvie! I have done such a wrong thing, such a wickedly wrong thing! I can hardly bear to tell even you."

"My dear penitent, what is it? Come, I will help you. Captain Bentick has proposed to you?"

Stella made a sign of assent.

"And you——"

"Have told him that he may come to-morrow."

Mrs. Ogilvie suppressed the expression of chagrin and disappointment which she felt on Stanley's account, and exonerated Stella from the charge of fickleness and coquetry with which she suspected Stella was charging herself.

"That is tantamount to accepting him, Stella."

"I know I ought not to have done it," Stella said sorrowfully. She was reproaching herself, but not about the matter which Mrs. Ogilvie imagined was weighing upon her mind. "I ought not to have done it—I know I ought not have done it! But—he seems to be very fond of me—I'm sure he *is* very fond of me—and he

was so open and daring about it that I felt my heart leap out to him, and—I forgot that I ought not to tell him to come again.”

“Why not?” Mrs. Ogilvie asked nervously. She felt sure now that Stella was suffering from the consciousness of having behaved badly.

“Because he has a good old name, and everybody knows who he is and all about his family, and I have neither name nor family for any one to know anything about. I ought to have remembered all that, but some way I didn’t.”

“Yours is a very venial offense, if that is the worst of which you have to accuse yourself, dear. He knows the story of your life, and is evidently perfectly satisfied with it.”

“Still, I ought not to have taken advantage of such generous and frank, fearless love,” Stella said remorsefully.

“Nonsense, child! There is no ‘taking advantage’ of him in the case, if you were heart-free when he asked you, and you feel that you can love him.”

“I feel that I can—that I do love him,” the girl said bravely; “and—I was heart-free,” she said more slowly.

“Then all is well,” Mrs. Ogilvie said cheerfully. She was disappointed for Stanley, for whom she had a warm regard and a great respect. But she was a woman, and she understood how Stanley’s frequent lapses into reserve that bordered on coldness must have chilled the warm heart that had not been able to perceptibly melt the thin ice in which he had encrusted himself.

“You don’t blame me *very* much, do you?” Stella asked apologetically.

"I don't blame you at all. I believe the instinct which has brought you two young people together to be a right and true one. My dear Stella, I have realized for a long time that you could never live in a perfect rarefied air; you could not breathe happily in it. You need 'warmth and color,' and——"

"That I've found in Lancelot," Stella said, finishing the quotation with a brilliant happy smile.

"Lord St. Errol must be prepared for the visitor he will have to-morrow, and for that visitor's request."

"Not to-night! not to-night!" Stella pleaded.

"Why not to-night? Indeed, it must be to-night."

"But not till after dinner—not till after I have gone to bed," Stella urged.

"You surely are not going to turn coward, my dear child! Your love must make you courageous; indeed, I don't see why your courage should be taxed at all."

"Perhaps Lord St. Errol won't understand about it. He may think that he—that we both have been hasty and imprudent. He may think it's impossible Captain Bentick and I can care for each other so—so quickly."

"He has but to look into his own heart, and he will understand quickly enough."

"Then, will you tell him, and wait till I'm gone to bed to do it? I wonder if his uncle and aunt will be angry about it?"

"I can answer for their not being that."

"You are very good to me—everybody here is very good to me!" Stella said warmly.

"Everybody here loves you, dear," Mrs. Ogilvie rejoined; and as she spoke she wished that one of the home party did not love Stella so well in his iron-bound way.

Fortunately for them all, St. Errol came home brimming over with zeal and enthusiasm about the hamlet which straggled about on the side of one of the wildest and most remote hills in the Peak District. He had found the people grim and rough, steeped up to the hilt in their dislike to and distrust of strangers, living hard, narrow, half-savage lives, the interests of which were bounded by the mines in which they worked.

He was full of schemes for the cultivation of their physical condition, and for the culture of their crude, harsh minds. He intended at once to build a reading and recreation room in the hamlet, to flood it with newspapers, chiefly illustrated ones, and bagatelle, cribbage, and other boards.

"They are semi-savage, a good many of them," Stella admitted. "Until they know who you are, they're just as likely to stone you as to say good day to you. They have been accustomed all around here to see me with papa all my life, so they've never stoned me."

"What delightful people!" Mrs. Ogilvie remarked.

"And some of the better class are just as boorish and uncouth," Stella went on rapidly. This was such a safe topic that she was resolved to keep it going as long as possible. "I remember some few years ago a clergyman came down as *locum tenens* to do duty at that church on the nearest hill. He brought his wife and little girls with him, and the first time the little girls went out into the village a lot of big boys of from fifteen to eighteen got round them and threw stones at them. They were rough young half-savages."

The discussion and comments which these remarks of Stella evoked carried them well through dinner, and

as soon as the two ladies got into the little drawing-room, which Mrs. Ogilvie made her headquarters, Stella pleaded fatigue, and went to bed.

"Dear, dear! I wish I were not in this act," Mrs. Ogilvie thought. "I must speak to St. Errol to-night, but if Stanley comes in with him, how am I to do it?"

However, she was spared trouble on that account. Stanley had noticed a subtle change in Stella at dinner, and a lover's intuition told him that it was due to something which had taken place since their parting in the grounds that afternoon.

"Whatever it is, God bless her!" he said to himself.

He was in no mood for either smoking or talking.

"I think I'll read up the war news in my own room, and then get to bed early," he told St. Errol, and added: "I get more tired at night than I ought to be. I think it's idleness that's disagreeing with me. I shall run up to town to-morrow, and find out if the doctors can't patch me up and give me leave to try a sea-voyage, with the prospect of work after it in the Transvaal."

Jock heard him say it, and instantly jumped on his knee, quivering with the best emotions of doghood.

The communication had been made, and Mrs. Ogilvie and St. Errol sat opposite to each other in profound silence for some time. At last Mrs. Ogilvie spoke:

"You are sorry."

"Not that. Bentick is a fine fellow, and Stella's happiness is my first consideration. But——"

"There must be no 'buts' now; the matter is taken out of our hands—unless you refuse your consent."

"Which I shall not do, which he would be the last

fellow on the face of the earth to wish me to do. I know now why he is going up to town to-morrow. He scented something of this."

" 'There's a Providence which shapes our ends,
Rough hew them as we will,' "

Mrs. Ogilvie quoted.

" 'There'll be some rough hewing to be done before he clears away what he feels for Stella,' " St. Errol replied, and that was all their loyalty to both the man and girl permitted them to say about that side of the subject.

Stanley had left before the others met at breakfast the next morning, and for some reason, which she would not allow herself to analyze, Stella felt her heart bound with relief when she heard he was gone. There was no shadow now to be cast over the sunshine of her love—excepting the shadow of Captain Bentick's speedy departure. But Stella's was essentially a sanguine nature, and she could never look upon the black side of things for any lengthened period. To part with him would be agony, but no one else had the right to feel the same agony, no one else could glory or weep for him as she would. He was her own! The one man in the world for her, as he had proved she was the one woman in the world for him.

A brief idyll! It lasted ten days: then he sailed for South Africa.

CHAPTER XVI.

FLIGHT.

A PROBLEM which perplexed St. Errol a good deal, and which he utterly failed to solve before he fell asleep that night, was how could he most considerately break the news of Stella's engagement to his best friend the next morning.

He was not angry with his ward for having made havoc of the plans which he had hoped would strengthen the already strong bonds which held Stanley and himself together. He was not even annoyed with her. He recognized and respected the right a woman has to dispose of herself in marriage as seems best to her. At the same time, his sympathies were with Stanley, and he shrank as a woman would from inflicting pain from the prospect of the blow he would be compelled to deal the man for whom he cared most in the world the next morning.

With the morning's light, however, and the arrival of his man and hot water, his trouble and perplexity on this point came to an end as his man gave him a note with the words :

"Mr. Stanley had to catch the five o'clock train, my lord, and being so early he would not disturb your lordship."

The note was brief :

“ MY DEAR OLD CHUM,

“ I’m off to try the cure I recommended to you—action !

“ Yours in fastest and firmest friendship,

“ GUY STANLEY.”

“ I can face the other fellow now with a better grace,” St. Errol thought, and for the first time since their alliance began Stanley’s absence was a relief to him.

* * * * *

At the cost of much trouble and money Madame Dalma had succeeded in breaking her contract with the management of the concert company with which she was touring. It was, perhaps, the greatest sacrifice she had ever made in her self-sacrificial life. To give up the practise of the art she loved, and the society of the fellow-artist who had grown dear to her, would have been hard enough in itself ; but it was harder still to know that she was exchanging these for a round of duties in the service of a man who would not appreciate, much less be grateful for, them.

She could not help remembering that he had been fractious, cynically cruel in speech, impossible to please, and callously indifferent to her feelings and unhappiness in the days of his prosperity, and the thought of what he would be in these days of adversity made her sick at heart. But he had judged her rightly. Without a murmur or a moment’s hesitation she got out of her engagement, incurred the ill-will of the management, which was reaping a golden harvest by means of her magnificent voice, and went back to England, home, and duty.

Mr. Clifford had been at a very low ebb on the day on which he had despatched his missive asking his wife to come back and look after him. Vixen's projected marriage hurt him considerably, but the doubts which assailed his mind as to the horse on which he had plunged coming in a winner hurt him still more. He really believed himself to be dying, and almost accused his wife of want of consideration in not coming over by telegraph-wire. He shivered before the fire and coughed more than he need have done, and poured pity lavishly upon himself.

But the shivering and the cough ceased presently, when, immediately after the well-known newsboy cry,

"All the winners ! all the winners !" was heard, his servant brought him a sporting paper, and he saw that the Geisha had romped in half a length ahead of the French horse, who came in second.

"By this I net ten thousand pounds ! That will see me through right enough," he thought exultantly, as, with every trace of invalidism banished from his bearing, he drove to his club, to be congratulated and applauded for the admirable sagacity with which he had picked out and gone strong on the winner.

Some men flattered him—he could absorb any amount of flattery—on the clear-headedness and foresight he had displayed when he told them.

"I've followed that horse right through her turf career. Knew she'd pull this off, though she hasn't done very much lately."

Then he gloated over the downfall of those who had pinned their faith and put their money on the French horse, and was altogether very happy—so happy that

his feeble spark of life flickered up quite brightly, and he regretted having sent for his wife under the mistaken impression that he was dying, and the knowledge that she would minister to his wants better than any one else. However, the reflection that Miss Calstock would probably feel pain at the reunion, and possibly feel jealous of the wife of whose existence she had only recently become aware, solaced him considerably.

He sold the diamonds and pearls which had been returned to him at grand prices, and for a few days enjoyed a small edition of the sensations of a millionaire. But the gambling blood ran freely in his veins, and by the time Mrs. Clifford rejoined him he was steeped once again in wo; for he picked out not one only, but two or three non-winners, and all that the Geisha had pulled in for him, together with a great part of the proceeds of the sale of the jewels, had gone. Then the spark which had flickered up with fictitious brilliancy faded again, and when his wife came—for whose presence he longed eagerly now—he was piteously ill.

The well-appointed brougham and man-servant were put down at once, and after a little time she persuaded him to move into rooms more suitable to their means, though not to his requirements. He still nourished the fallacious hope that if he could “only lay his hands on a few hundreds he could retrieve all he had lost.”

He had been very ingratiating in his manner to his wife since her return, and she would not allow herself to think that it was only because he needed her, and what she could give and do for him, that he was so. It never entered her mind to suspect the purpose that was underlying his. He seemed to have eliminated the

gambling blood from his veins, and never looked at a sporting paper—before her.

She had brought back a few hundreds from America, enough to keep them in comfort for a year or two at the rate at which they were living. But her heart sank within her when she reflected that this little would come to an end, and then——

Then, unless he allowed her to go back to the concerts and work for their maintenance, abject poverty would stare them in the face, for every day in which she was not before the public she was fading away from the public. While she sat there doing nothing, unable to study, because the sound of music of any kind grated on his battered nerves, other sopranos were coming to the fore, and she knew that she must ere long take her place as one of the “has beens.”

One day she mooted the matter to him. He had been extraordinarily ingratiating, considerate, and contented for several hours, and the opportunity struck her as a good one.

“James,” she began—she would never call him “Jem,” because she had learnt that the “Vixen,” whose lost friendship he still at times bewailed, had called him by that name—“James, it would be better for us both if you could spare me to my profession again. The little store I have will come to an end in a few months, and we have nothing to fall back upon. Besides, I should be a happier, and therefore a better, woman if I were at work again. My heart is in my art, and it’s being starved now.”

To her surprise, he looked quite pleased.

“I have been thinking the same thing, dear. Not that the consideration of money entered into my head,

but I know you would be, as you say, happier if you were in pursuit of your calling again. The only thing"—and he sighed—"is that I shall lose your society a good deal when you sing at evening concerts. My cough won't permit me to go to them."

She did not remind him that his cough permitted him to go to his club in the evening. She was too pleased at his having given a willing consent to risk a jar.

"Then I will go to my agent at once. Oh, I hope he won't be full up! I am longing to be in the field again."

"You haven't been out of it long, dear. But I entirely sympathize with you. I, too, long to be at work again; work would prolong my life, I believe. If I could only lay my hand on a couple of hundred pounds, I could invest it in a way that would make a new man of me."

"Not on a horse, James?"

"Not on a horse—oh no!" He knit his brow, and looked abstractedly into the fire as he went on: "It's a single share in a genuine old-established business house that is paying fifty per cent."

"I will lend you the two hundred," she said quickly.

She was so elated at going back to the profession that was the best part of her life, that every generous impulse was quickened, and she did not pause to make cautious inquiries.

"You are a brick!" he said, taking her hand and kissing it.

Five minutes later he was in possession of the cheque, and she was saying joyfully:

"And now for my agent."

"Upon my word, she is a brick!" Mr. Clifford said

of his wife, as about an hour after he started with the cheque in his pocket-book to the office of the man with whom he was going to negotiate for the purchase of the share in the old-established business that paid such a good percentage.

It was a genuine thing. For once, Mr. Clifford had spoken neither more nor less than the truth in describing it, and his intentions regarding it. The chance had been put in his way by a young member of the firm who had known and been impressed by Clifford in those other days when Clifford was a swell, and the young business man was a young business man merely.

"She's a brick, and I'll repay her fairly," he repeated to himself.

Then he stopped to look at the last war news which was posted up, and as he was reading it a man greeted him heartily.

"Glad to see you, Clifford, and to see you looking so much better! Got anything on your friend the Geisha?"

"No. Where is she? I haven't been following her up."

"That's just what you should have been doing. She's all your fancy painted her, and a good deal more. Come on to the club."

Clifford went on to the club, and found that he was not too late to back the Geisha. The result would be known at two o'clock: he would not have long to wait for it. And—well, it was a quicker and easier way of making money and enabling him to return his wife's loan than by buying a share in a City business, which now seemed to him paltry.

Stella was not distressed, nor was she even very sorry, when she found that Stanley had gone without any last words for any one of them. She was full to overflowing of kindly feeling towards him, but she understood now that he would always have checked and chilled her at such times, perhaps, when she could least bear check or chill. She even admitted to herself that, had they come together—as now and again he had made her think and hope they would—she might have grown to be afraid of him, or, rather, afraid of offending him, and so have grown nervous in his presence.

She liked him so much, she respected him so much, that she would have liked to have heard some good words of encouragement from him on this day when she was going to pledge herself to marry another man. But as by his departure he had put that possibility out of the question, she would not permit herself to think that he “might have been kinder,” but stuck up for him loyally both in heart and words.

“He is so eager for work, he does so loathe idleness, that he has gone off to do it before he is quite fit for it. And he would have been so fit if I had not been the cause of the accident,” she explained anxiously to Mrs. Ogilvie and St. Errol when the latter told her that Stanley was gone.

“I hope he will get the work that he wants ; but it’s hard to get. All the best papers have their own men, and he won’t go on a second-rate paper. Poor chap ! as he meant going, he ought to have gone six weeks ago ; then he would have gone to the fore in leaps and bounds. He sees the comedy and tragedy in everything, and puts each before you as vividly with his pen as with his pencil.”

St. Errol was missing his comrade already. Everything might have, ought to have, arranged itself so perfectly. Now a girl's whim or want of purpose had upset everything.

"I think Mr. Stanley will always get what he really wants," Stella said quietly.

"You do? Why?"

"Because I think if he really wants anything, he has the power to take it. But when he halts between two opinions, he'll be likely to lose what he thinks he wants to get."

"Fascinating little analyst of character as you are," St. Errol said laughingly, "you know nothing of the one you're trying to dissect. He never halts between two opinions. He discerns at a glance if a man is straight in every way or not, and if he isn't straight, Stanley will have none of him."

"And how about a woman?" Stella asked.

"He could never give a thought to one who wasn't straight, thought he might have to give her up; that question is easily answered."

"Yes, so easily," Stella assented. "He's a real knight. I can't imagine our—your being here without him."

* * * * *

"Bentick has sent me a note, saying he will call here at one, and hopes I can see him. I must say yes, and ask him to luncheon, and all that sort of thing, mustn't I?" St. Errol asked Mrs. Ogilvie, when Stella strolled out of the breakfast-room with the intention of taking a good long walk.

"And say it all graciously," Mrs. Ogilvie replied

promptly. "She has a marvelous power of enjoyment and happiness, and an equally marvelous power of misery and pain. Give her all the brightness you can now; the clouds will lower soon enough."

"Not one shall pass over her head that I can avert," he said warmly. "Still—forgive me, I must say it—I think it shows a slightly vacillating nature, a little instability of character, that she should have resigned Stanley without an effort to retain him, and surrendered to Bentick at the first attack."

"Did Mr. Stanley show that he wished to be retained? No! He wrapped himself up in reserve that befogged Stella. *He* has had a hundred chances, and has not taken them. Captain Bentick had one, and took it like a man."

"Poor old boy! He and I are in the same boat," St. Errol said, with a laugh, in which there was not a particle of merriment. "I hope he'll be lucky enough to get a billet on some paper, and go out to the war; but the nuisance of it is that all the good ones are filled already by true and tried men."

Mrs. Ogilvie shuddered involuntarily.

"Poor Stella has that bitterness before her. Her lover is to sail in a fortnight," she said sadly.

"Lucky fellow!"

"Yes; one can't wish a soldier to stay at home at ease, when thousands of his fellows are fighting for such a splendid cause. But, still, I say again, poor Stella!"

"She'll bear it like a brick—outwardly, at any rate," St. Errol said with conviction.

As he spoke, Stella came flying back into the room, an open telegram in her hand.

“I’ve had this from Mrs. Clifford ! Isn’t it lovely ? She’s in London. She’s——”

Want of breath stopped her, and she gave the telegram into St. Errol’s hand. What he read made him throb with pleasure and pain.

CHAPTER XVII.

GOOD RESOLUTIONS.

WHEN Mr. Clifford had started from home with his wife's cheque in his pocket, he had about him the proud consciousness of being full of manly, upright, honorable resolutions concerning the disposal of it.

He saw prospectively a home founded on the rock of safe, remunerative commercial integrity, and it almost brought the tears to his eyes to think how grateful his wife would be and ought to be to him for the foresight and acumen he meant to display in the investment of her little savings. In fact, he believed himself to be a thoroughly good, noble-hearted fellow, and determined that as soon as the profits began to pour in he would withdraw his consent to his wife's singing in public and make her stay at home in the evenings to amuse him.

Then he turned into the club with the man who had stirred up his memories of, and former ambitions about, the Geisha, and betted freely with men who could put down a hundred pounds to his one at any time. At length he stood to win very heavily—if the mare was first at the post, as she was sure to be. Very soon "All the winners!" was being shouted out, and when he eagerly secured the sporting sheet the Geisha was seen to be the last horse in.

He went out of the club owing two hundred pounds in excess of the cheque his wife had given him in the morning, and with the ideal home and the scheme of his wife being kept at home in the evening being smashed to atoms. So with a speedy change of front he assured himself that she was so devoted to her art that the more she was permitted to practise it the better she would be pleased, and magnanimously resolved to encourage her to exert herself to the utmost.

Then he went back to their lodgings, and relapsed into the blackest low spirits.

She was in a hopeful, almost a light-hearted, vein when she came home. The interview with her agent had been highly satisfactory. He was able to offer her many and good engagements in the immediate present, and to hold out the prospect of very much better ones in the near future. This pleased the artist part of her.

The womanly part was gratified also. It was good to know that at last her lazy, ne'er-do-well husband was going to do something better than bet and gamble. He had seemed so sincere and hopeful that she could not help being sanguine.

Besides this, she had another source of pleasure. She was engaged to sing at a concert in Manchester. St. Errol Castle was within easy distance by train of Manchester, and she guessed that by this time Stella would be there. So she sent a wire to Miss St. Errol, giving her the date and time of the concert, and asking her to be there, and to come round to the artists' room.

Having done this, she went home to find Mr. Clifford "prostrated," as he termed it, and raging against fate. She did not reproach him verbally, nor did she assume

the air of a suffering martyr. Either would have been thrown away upon him, she knew, and would only have given him an excuse for being more irritable and capacious than he was already. She only said, "I know you don't like to see anything like needful needlework going on, James. But I must look over and renovate two or three of my concert dresses, and this is the only place I can do them in. I won't make more scraps of ribbon and chiffon than I can help."

"I should have thought you would find it more profitable to study, and to give your dresses into the hands of a skilled dressmaker. But don't mind me. If I have a corner of the room in which to eat my bread and cheese by and by, that will be quite good enough for me."

She could not suppress the angry contempt which flashed into her eyes, and curled her lip as she listened to this, and thought of the thousands of our splendid, gallant soldiers of all ranks who, for long hours fraught with deadly peril, had to do without the scrap of bread and cheese, much more the quiet corner in which to eat it.

"By the way," he said presently, when she was deep in the consideration of how she could conjure some travel-stains and crumples out of one of her most effective dresses—"by the way, hasn't that fellow you used to know a place somewhere near Manchester?"

"He has. Errol Castle."

"It would be rather a civil thing if he asked you to stay there. I heard from a man that he has just got his ward and her chaperon staying with him, and that the ward is a very pretty girl."

"She is a very lovely girl."

"How do you know?" he asked, with quick suspicion.

"Because her late guardian, old Lord St. Errol, engaged me as her governess, and directly I arrived at Rose-in-Vale, his other place, he took a dislike to me, and gave me notice to leave next day."

"Dismissed you! like his cheek to dismiss *my* wife. If he were alive he should answer for it to me," said Mr. Clifford, with the ominous spots aflame on either cheek.

It was hardly worth her while to remind him that her own husband had treated her infinitely more insultingly than old Lord St. Errol had done.

After brooding over this latest affront to his dignity in silence, he said: "I think I had better go with you to Manchester, just to let them see that you have a husband quite ready to and capable of taking care of you."

Her blood ran cold in her veins at the prospect. Her prophetic soul told her that he would cavil at all business arrangements, and more than likely say disparaging things about the rest of the company. Moreover, she would have none of that sweet perfect peace and rest which is so essential to an artist after an evening's exertion. However, as she knew from the experience of long ago that it was useless to reason or expostulate with him when he had made up his mind to pursue any course, she combined the wisdom of the serpent with the softness of the dove, and went on with her work without a word.

This absence of all opposition to his proposal was disconcerting, as the idea of making a bargain that should be good for himself with her had struck him.

He knew that it would be disadvantageous to her professionally that he should accompany her on the projected concert tour, as he was unable to refrain from making himself intensely disagreeable to every one around him. But if she showed aversion to the plan, he was quite prepared to let her buy him off. He would remain behind a lonely, unhappy man, on condition she let him have another two hundred pounds. He had not confided the fact to her that he had lost two hundred more than the cheque for that sum which she had given him, and he thought now that if she gave him what he asked for he could pay his debts of honor, and she would be none the wiser for it.

His cough was very bad, really bad ; there was no sham or pretense about that. She began to pity him very much for what he would necessarily endure in traveling in this dank weather, and in the possibly damp, and more than probably uncomfortable, quarters in which they would have to put up during the tour.

“Poor James !” she said at last, “if I could feel sure that you would be well catered for and warmed all the time, I would certainly say come on tour with me. But we are going to little out-of-the-way towns as well as big ones, and we must take what we can get wherever we go. I believe the management is good, but I don’t know, and you’re really not strong enough to rough it. Had you not better stay here ? Our landlady is a good woman, and will look after your comfort. Shall I make arrangements with her, James ? Will you stay here ?”

This was the opportunity he wanted and worked up for ; but he was wary from force of habit and deceitful by preference. For an hour he affected to be deeply

hurt at what he called her "evident repugnance to having him with her." At the end of the hour he told her that "perhaps she was right; perhaps he would be only a hindrance to her work."

"But I can't stay here in solitude and idleness," he went on; "at present I am only a sleeping partner in the business I spoke to you about. But if I could put my hand on another two hundred pounds, I could take an active share in the management, and make a very good thing of it. I could get a lot of fellows in my own set to the firm as customers—fellows who, if they knew I should benefit by it, would give the business a good fillip."

"You are not a business man; don't you think you had better remain a sleeping partner only?"

"It's not kind to throw cold water on my scheme. The man who first mooted the matter to me thinks I have a remarkable capacity for business, and he has an unerring commercial instinct. However, as you think you know better, we will say no more about it. You will have only yourself to blame when the chance is gone and we fall into an abyss of poverty, out of which no efforts of mine will avail to extricate us."

"What is it you want? Will you tell me plainly, James?"

"I told you as plainly as possible that I wanted two hundred pounds. With that sum I should feel a new man."

"I will try to let you have it, but it will cripple me very much."

"You'll have your salary to keep you going, and I shall very soon be in a position to refund you what you so grudgingly lend me."

“If I lend it to you, will you give up betting and racing?”

“On my word of honor I will,” he promised glibly; and she lent him the money and tried to believe him.

He paid his debts of honor, and then cast about in his mind for a possible source of further supplies. Fortunately—or perhaps the reverse—he met a young fellow who had lately come into a large and utterly unexpected property. He was brimming over with liberal feeling towards all his less lucky fellow-creatures. He was likewise brimming over with the lavishness that undue quantities of champagne is liable to engender.

The two men spent a pleasant morning and lunched together. They then went to look at half a dozen hunters and likely colts that the young Cræsus had lately purchased. Mr. Clifford admired the lot in judicious terms, and when they parted Mr. Clifford had his young friend’s cheque for five hundred pounds in his pocket.

He went home in such high spirits and such a happy, generous mood, that his wife reproached herself for having hesitated to lend him the money which he had apparently turned to such good account. He really had invested a portion of it in the business of which he had spoken, and he felt himself to be such a good fellow for having done it, that he made his wife a present of twenty pounds’ worth of Parisian diamonds exquisitely set in fine gold, and told her that it would be a satisfaction to him to know that “she would shine with the best” in the many hours of solitude to which he was looking forward with complacency.

“I hate London!” he assured her, when she was starting for Manchester; “but the climate here is the

only English one I can stand. Perhaps next year we may try the Italian Riviera for a change ; we certainly will if this business turns out half as well as I expect."

She knew that London was the only place in England in which he would live, unless he could stay in country houses for big shoots and hunting. But she kept her knowledge to herself, and went off in a comparatively happy frame of mind to Manchester.

* * * * *

The interview between the inexperienced guardian and the impulsive lover had passed off. It appeared as if the course of the latter's true love was to run very smoothly indeed. His own people were delighted that he had, as they said, chosen a girl after their own hearts. Lord St. Errol was delighted that the girl he had grown to love with a real brotherly affection was supremely happy, in spite of her wilful misery-making for herself about trifles, and in spite, also, of the baffled and mortified feeling she must have endured about Stanley. The one drawback to this felicity—there must always be a drawback—was that in a fortnight or ten days Captain Bentick was to sail for South Africa.

Stella was a high-couraged girl. She never weakened or worried those about her by any display of tearful emotion or unreasonable repining. From the first she realized that a soldier's wife or mother must make his soldiering the first and paramount interest of her life, the interest to which her feelings and emotions must be entirely subordinated. This had been her theory before she had linked her life with Basil Bentick's, and she put that theory into practise now that she knew that

the life which was dearer to her than her own would soon be in the deadliest danger. It is of such women that heroes are born.

Naturally they both wished to be married before he went, and the old Benticks were as keen about it as their nephew was.

"Let her have the right to openly glory or grieve for me," Captain Bentick pleaded to the anything but inexorable guardian.

So within a day or two a special license was got, and in a whirl of happiness, dread, and excitement Stella looked forward to being made the wife of the man she loved so desperately and stanchly two days after the Manchester concert at which Madame Dalma was to sing.

* * * * *

"You'll come with us?" the girl pleaded very prettily to her guardian. "Basil and I will enjoy it so much more if you're there."

"And if I am there I mustn't speak to her, Stella. Don't tempt me to go. I'll take any number of tickets you like to get for me; but I won't go and force myself on her notice, and so make her come to the conclusion that I am either a fool or a scoundrel."

"How you make me love you!" Stella said. "You are so *right* and I am so wrong in wishing you to go. But—I can't help wishing."

"Think of your own happy future, my dear girl, and don't trouble yourself about my less happy one. Come, you dear little bride-elect, don't draw despondent lines round the corners of your mouth."

"I'm not despondent, I'm too happy. How can I

dare to be happy with *that* before me ? ” She pointed to the list of “ killed, wounded and missing ” in the last battle. “ But I am happy, and I am proud,” she went on. “ Is that wrong, St. Errol ? I think Basil would be sick of the sight of me if I quailed now.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE EVE OF THE WEDDING.

THE night of the Manchester concert was as bright, bracing, and beautiful as a winter night can be. The atmosphere was infectious, and so the whole company were bright and well braced ; while the lady members of it were bright and beautiful, partly by reason of the house being filled to overflowing, and partly because their dresses and jewelry were lovely—at night.

The Errol Castle people were there in great force. St. Errol had, chiefly at Stella's instigation, overcome his hyperhonorableness to even look at or hear Madame Dalma again.

"It will be braver to go than to stay away," she had declared. "If you stay away, she will think that you are caring for her *dreadfully* still, and that would upset her, poor dear ! Now, you wouldn't like to do that, would you ?"

"Certainly not ; I'll go," he said ; and go he did, together with Mrs. Ogilvie, Stella, and the Benticks.

Madame Dalma had sent another telegram to Stella, asking the latter not to go round to the artists' room until after her (Dalma's) second song. Therefore the greater part of the first half of the concert was weariness

and vexation of spirit to Stella and St. Errol, for Madame Dalma was down in it for only one number. They were both too impatient for her to come on to appreciate the efforts, however laudable and excellent, of those who preceded her. And after hearing her, they could not think of, or listen to, her successors.

At length the time came when Stella was free to go and seek the friend for whom she entertained such a strangely strong sympathetic regard.

A few artists and their friends were standing about, chatting and laughing merrily, when Miss St. Errol went into the artists' room. The scene was quite a novel one to her, and for a moment or two she felt bewildered. She wondered why Mrs. Clifford did not come to meet her. But just as she was straining her eyes in all directions, and beginning to make eager inquiries of the person nearest to her, she caught sight of Dalma reading a telegram by the light of an electric lamp, looking agitated and unhappy.

With the sympathetic tact that is born of good feeling as well as good breeding, the girl abstained from noticing the emotion which was nearly overcoming her friend. They greeted each other warmly as ever, and then, after heartily congratulating the diva on the exquisite way in which she had sang that night, Stella began to pour out her tale of joy and love.

"I am to be married to-morrow," she was beginning, when Mrs. Clifford interrupted by saying :

"How soon—how very soon!"

"Not a bit too soon, you will allow, when I tell you that my *fiancé* is a soldier, and is under orders for South Africa. That is the pity of it : he won't let me go with him, and we shall be parted in a few days.

But other brides have to bear the same trouble, and I mean to show that I'm a real soldier's wife."

"How long has he been a soldier?" Dalma asked quietly.

"Oh, for years and years—I don't know how many. But he's Captain Bentick now. I forgot! You don't know anything about him or my engagement. It all came about so suddenly. You must let me bring him round after the concert, and introduce him to you. He's in the front row, with Mrs. Ogilvie and my guardian, and his uncle and aunt. You'll think him a dear fellow, I know."

"I am sure I shall. But I have just had a telegram, which will take me back to town by the first train after my last song."

"Oh no, you mustn't go; you must stay here and see me married. You will, won't you?" Stella pleaded.

"I must give up everything, business as well as pleasure. This is from my landlady, telling me that Mr. Clifford is much worse, and that I must go back at once."

"I am very, very sorry. It is sad for you."

"I have very little but sadness to encounter. But this particular bit of it is inevitable; he can't help being ill, poor fellow!"

Stella nodded her head in grave acquiescence with this proposition. He certainly could not help being ill, but he certainly could have helped treating his wife in days of yore in such a way as to make going back to him now when he was suffering a matter of sadness to her.

St. Errol, without having any desire to depreciate Mr. Clifford in the eyes of his ward, had thrown more

than one singularly unbecoming sidelight on that gentleman. Stella was nothing if not a warm partisan of any person or cause to whom and which she had once given in her adhesion. She had given in this to Mrs. Clifford and St. Errol with all her heart and soul. Their views were her views ; their wrongs and animosities were hers. She felt as if Mr. Clifford had wronged her deeply now, by recalling his wife just as that wife was specially wanted to attend a friend's wedding.

"You must let us take you to the station and see you off. Remember, this is the last favor I ask of you before I'm married."

This Stella whispered as it came to Dalma's turn to go on again.

Dalma shook her head.

"I had better and would rather go alone. Mr. Clifford is in a very critical state, I fear, and it would ill-become me to go off in obedience to the recall in anything but the quietest way. Now go, dear. I shall be with you in spirit, though not in the flesh, to-morrow."

Dalma sang her last song gloriously. It was a very pathetic one, and the pathos in her face and manner as well as in her voice touched her audience deeply. Volleys of applause greeted her as she finished, but she would not obey a recall, much less take an encore. She bowed definitely, and did not reappear, and as they went home that night Stella told St. Errol the reason of her (Mrs. Clifford's) abrupt departure.

He looked grave and sad as he listened, but he cheered up almost at once, and said they "must not touch on gloomy topics again before the wedding." Each one indorsed this opinion, whatever each indi-

vidual felt. Never a doubt or fear had as yet assailed the hearts of the young couple who were so soon to be united, though they knew that close on the union must come a separation. They lived in the brilliant present and the bright immediate future, and would not have exchanged their prospects for those of any crowned head in Europe.

The Bentick party and the Castle Errol people had to part company at the station nearest to the last place.

"Never mind, darling: to-morrow you will be my *wife*," Basil Bentick whispered, when Stella gave a gasping sigh as she was bidding him good night.

She threw her head up with a proud, triumphant, happy gesture. That was his parting glimpse of her.

"For only a few hours," he told himself joyously.

Once or twice on the rest of their way home Mrs. Bentick swallowed her own emotions, and struggled gallantly to enter into those of mingled love and pride and impatience which her nephew was displaying. The love and pride were freely, frankly bestowed upon Stella. The impatience was to be "off to the front, to have his share in it all, not to let other fellows have the best of the sport."

He was her own dear nephew, dear as a son to the childless woman, and her grief at parting with him on the errand he was so anxious to depart upon was great. But even greater was the sorrow she felt for the young life that was so soon to be bound up in his, perhaps only to be blighted.

Stella had no forebodings. The only crumple in her rose-leaf, the only drop of bitter in her sweet cup of happiness, was that Mrs. Clifford could not come to the wedding on the following day.

The wedding-dress and all its appointments, the jewels of every description, the cases of silver and gold, the furs and laces, were all laid out in a room adjoining her boudoir.

Late as it was when they reached Castle Errol that night after the concert, it was Stella's fancy that Mrs. Ogilvie and St. Errol should go with her to look at some presents from the Bentick side which had arrived during her absence.

"Let us go, and get to rest, my darling girl. Remember, you must look your beautiful best to-morrow, and it is so late already," Mrs. Ogilvie protested when Stella had called for their attention to a hundred things, and was going over them again.

"Wait a little longer. I feel I can't be left alone to-night. There's something coming to me ; I know it—I know it."

As she spoke, the outer castle bell clanged, and in a minute or two Lord St. Errol, who had rushed down at the first sound, was face to face with Captain Bentick.

He was pale and palpitating from the undue haste with which he had ridden over. But after a minute it was in quite a steady voice that he said :

"My orders have come to start at once and join the regiment at ten o'clock to-morrow morning. Let me see Stella. It's a bad blow for both of us, but she'll bear it like a brick."

Bear it like a brick she did when she was called down from her brief waking dream of bliss. But it was the sort of "bearing it" that tells not only on the one on whom the chief strain is laid, but on those who behold it.

It was late, very late, and he had so much to do, so

much that was due from him to the glorious service to which he belonged, that he had but a few minutes to give to this girl whom it was breaking his heart-strings to leave behind him. However, there "were thousands of other fellows in his case, and thousands of other women in hers," they reminded each other, and then Basil Bentick went away with as light a mien as any and all of our bravest and best have worn when ordered to the front.

There was no going to Southampton, no going to see the inspiring send-off which she had pictured seeing with much enthusiasm when he was the mere acquaintance of an hour. The train Captain Bentick was bound to catch was an express, and did not stop at the only station that was available from Castle Errol. So Stella, without making any parade of fortitude, just bore it—bore this second and minor disappointment without wincing.

Nor did she put on an air of extreme patience and resignation. That, she knew, would have excited sympathy, felt if even unexpressed. Sympathy was about the last thing she could have stood without flinching at this juncture—sympathy that was verbally expressed, that is.

So she went off "to rest," as she promised Mrs. Ogilvie, and spent the night in wrapping up and packing away the wedding-presents, which she was resolved to keep fresh, untarnished, and untouched by other people until he came back to claim them—and her. She did not spend the whole hours of the night in this work, poor girl! She spent many of them in prayer, in such prayer as God had never put it into her tender heart to utter before in her life. Her prayers were not only for him,

for her lover, but for the countless thousands who are sacrificing themselves and all they hold dear, and all they own, for their country.

Then, as sleep would not come, she read some verses descriptive of the horrors of war by a man who knows them well—has endured and suffered through them :

“Through ceaseless rain the rival cannon sounded,
 With sulky iteration boom on boom,
 And while assailant and defender pounded
 Each other with those epigrams of doom
 I sat at table by my friends surrounded,
 And mirth and music lit the dingy room ;
 We each made merry, one and all, though dinner
 Had failed for days, and we were growing thinner.

“There, as the sulky, iterated boom
 Shook the thick air, our songs of home we sang,
 Till memory brought for each on Fancy’s loom
 Unmoved, unshaken by war’s clash and clang,
 Some dreamy picture woven in light and gloom
 Of home and peace ! While some sweet voice that sang—
 All-valued hour, too little valued then—
 Last in this song or that would sing again.

* * * * *

“I drank each health, and every man drank mine,
 Chaffing grimaces into jovial grin ;
 And ever when we ceased the roar
 Of rival cannon smote the ear once more.

“And e’er the genial wits renewed their fight
 We heard the plashing of the mournful rain,
 The outer voices of the dismal night
 Wept, sobbed, and clamored at the window-pane
 With moanings of despair and fear and flight,
 Like those which vex in sleep a fevered brain,
 Until again the cannon from their place
 Put all these sounds to silence for a space.

“ We pushed the gourd about and jested hard,
Sang rattling songs, told many a rattling tale—
A jest may keep the heart's deep flood-gates barred—
Chant gaily, Pity, lest thy blood grow pale,
Bid every sprightly fancy stand at guard,
Be noisy, Mirth, lest all thy mirth should fail.
And yet and yet our neighbor miseries
Would blur the sparkle in our hearts and eyes.

“ For near at hand there lay such countless woes,
Such upheaved sorrow as no tongue can tell,
Where helpless Pity's ineffectual throes
Made that long shamble seem a ghastly hell,
And all the broken, battered, blood-stained rows
Of dead seemed blessed in that they slept so well
Where the soul sickened and the heart grew faint
At scenes a Dante would not dare to paint.

“ What would you? Shall we shame our heart with tears?
Mirth grows hysteric; choose a milder vein;
Bring some unwithered flower of bygone years,
Yet fresh with fragrance of its native lane,
Or tell some tale of your own hopes and fears,
And trust our hearts to answer to the strain.
Or sing some homely song, that thought may roam
On its sweet wings once more to peace and home.”

She knew that they were written by D. Christie Murray, a brilliant and at one time distinguished war-correspondent; and as this knowledge flashed upon her memory, she recalled the fact that it was to seek for this work that Guy Stanley had left them.

“ I wonder if he and Basil will meet, and if they do, will they like each other?” she thought; and with that thought vividly in her mind she went to sleep, and dreamt about something utterly different and immaterial, after the perverse way in which women do dream.

While they were at breakfast on the morning of what should have been her wedding-day, Stella was setting the example of putting the best face on it all, and enduring the pain and sorrow with a high-held head.

“By this time the *Medusa* has sailed,” she said steadily, speaking of the transport in which Basil’s regiment, among others, was to be taken to Cape Town. “It is forty minutes past ten, and they were to sail at half-past. I must go over and comfort Mrs. Bentick presently—that was the last thing Basil told me to do.”

Neither Mrs. Ogilvie nor St. Errol were given to speaking platitudes; therefore they did not tell her what they knew would be the fact, that in doing this she would find her own best comfort. Instead of doing this, they gave her plenty to remember in the way of messages about the village entertainments and the schools that were shortly coming off, and Stella supported their endeavors to take a cheerful view of things splendidly.

But now and again those realistic, harrowing lines which she had read in the night would come into her mind, and nearly upset that mind’s balance.

Soon her cobs were at the door, her own dogs were clustered round them in eager expectation of a run, and Jock was seated on the cushion of the seat by the side of the one she would presently occupy. Mrs. Ogilvie had pleaded that ever useful letter-writing as an excuse for not going with her, wishing the girl’s heart to have it all its own free, unfettered, unobserved way in her first interview with the people who were like parents to her lover.

She was taking leave of them, talking rapidly, and

telling them what she meant to do in the village as she passed through it.

"I shall tell them myself that the grown-ups are to have their dinner, the children their tea and games, just the same, though there will be no wedding to-day," she was saying, when for the third time in her life a telegram was brought to her.

It was Basil bidding them all to come at once. Something had gone wrong with the "*Medusa's* machinery," and they would not be able to start till the following day at twelve o'clock.

They were off within half an hour, and traveled with the Benticks, who treated Stella as if she were a young crowned head, and altogether made so much of her that she realized fully, proudly, and gratefully how inestimably dear the man she was pledged to marry was to the people who regarded him as their son.

* * * * *

By the time Mrs. Clifford reached their lodgings, although she had traveled express in response to a telegram, she found that there was no immediate cause for alarm, as the doctor phrased it, in her husband's condition.

"The fact is, my dear madam, he got hipped. The landlady tells me he saw something in an evening paper that upset him to such an extent that he had to go to bed and request her to send for you. He is certainly in a very weak, nervous, prostrate condition, but physically he is better than when I saw him last. If you can keep his mind at ease, I see no reason for his not living for many years, more or less of an invalid, of course, but still able to enjoy life in a quiet way—a quiet way, you must remember."

"I will try to keep his mind, and try to get him to enjoy life in a quiet way," she said calmly.

"Your mind must be greatly relieved to find him so much better than the telegram led you to expect?" he asked, regarding her steadily.

"It is infinitely relieved. Leaving him so much better, as I thought, I should have reproached myself dreadfully if in my indulgence of my professional duties he had been neglected or had in any way missed me."

When Mrs. Clifford went back to her husband's bedroom, she found him with half-closed eyes and a voice that seemed to be straining to make itself heard. But there was a spice of malice in the half-smothered tones, which both hurt and annoyed her, when he said :

"So that fellow St. Errol was at the concert I was so unhappy as to be compelled to interrupt?"

"He was. But how did you know it?"

"A fellow I know happened to travel with him and his party from Marple to Manchester, and heard them speaking about you."

"In other words, a detective, James?"

"No, no! a fellow I know."

"And it was on account of the information this 'fellow' must have wired to you that you have ruined what would probably have been a successful tour?"

"I'm sick of your successful tours and your other forms of selfishness," he said crossly.

"The other day you wished me to go on this one," she reminded him quietly.

"The other day I did not know that, through the villainy of others, I should be left stranded without a penny, and consequently without a friend in this place, which I hate. Don't put your hands up to your head

in that despairing play-actress way. I hate anything theatrical in private life. You can see I'm at the last ebb, and yet you don't mind showing me clearly that you're broken-hearted at leaving the place where you had that fellow at your heels."

"For your own sake, I am sorry you think so badly of me."

"You don't mean to say that, because I speak truthfully—perhaps a little too truthfully—you will go away and leave me to starve?"

"If I stay here doing nothing, we shall probably starve together, James."

"Now you're doing the martyr business. If there is one thing more repulsive than another to me, it is the social or moral martyr spirit. Simply because I venture to say I do not approve of your absenting yourself from your husband and your home in the way you do, you get upon stilts, declare you will live an idle life, and that we must starve together. It is inconceivably ridiculous that a woman with any brains at all should rush from one extreme to another in this way."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Ask Miss St. Errol, who, I hear, is devoted to you, to lend you a few hundreds for a short time—a very short time—to save you from—well, from a great deal of unpleasantness. The girl has money of her own, and that fool of a guardian of hers would give her anything she asked for."

"After what you have said, I don't think I can ever look Stella or Lord St. Errol in the face again. You might have spared me this—this final degradation."

"More theatricals? Where does the degradation come in when I ask you to accept a little temporary aid

from a young woman whom you profess to regard as a sister? But I say no more—I say no more!”

After that he said a great deal more, and had the satisfaction of seeing that his wife was no happier than himself.

CHAPTER XIX.

AT THE HULK.

THE quaintness of The Hulk was only exceeded by the extraordinary personality of its chief inhabitant. Originally The Hulk had been merely two ordinary uncomfortable laborers' cottages. These had been cleverly joined together and expanded into a comfortable, unique little house. Originally the master of it had been a smart officer in the R.N., a fearless, dauntless, ne'er-do-well, a strict disciplinarian, reckless on land, rigorous at sea, feared and loved by his men, and dreaded by his family.

The Hulk stood on rather a low piece of land at the sharp end of a triangular piece of ground known as No-man's Land, about five miles from Castle Errol. The other part of the triangle was devoted to fruit-trees and flower-beds, not mixed up in a heterogeneous way, but trimly ordered and sharply cut, less with an eye to beauty than neatness and productiveness. The old naval officer had nothing but his pension and his garden-stuff to live upon, so he devoted all his time and energy to the cultivation of the latter, with such good results that his fruit and vegetables always commanded the best price in the market to which he sent

them in a donkey-cart driven by a stalwart boy three times a week.

Mr. Ledger's aspect when engaged in digging, sowing seeds, or pruning trees was not prepossessing. A much-worn old veleteen coat covered his tall, spare frame, and a battered old hat sat upon his head. His legs were encased in leather breeches, and his general appearance was a cross between a poverty-stricken game-keeper and a tramp.

But when his day's work was over, all this was changed. He would then go into his quaint little house, take a bath, and dress himself in evening clothes as fastidiously and carefully as if he were going to a dinner-party to meet the highest in the land. Summer and winter, he invariably dined at eight o'clock, and, however frugal the repast might be, he always insisted upon his table being well ordered and his viands daintily served.

A grim, honest, taciturn, middle-aged woman was his sole domestic. The intercourse he held with her was severely limited. When she brought in his breakfast he wished her good morning, and when she brought in the silver the last thing before going to bed he wished her good night. She knew her duties thoroughly, and performed them with machine-like exactitude; therefore he had never any occasion to give her orders and directions. She had a half-day's holiday once a week, and in her absence the garden-boy carried in and cleared away the dinner. It was a monotonous, solitary life, but both the master and the servant liked monotony and solitude, and in their respective ways they were very happy and contented.

Mr. Ledger's one amusement was reading. He took

the *Times* and a service paper, and on the rare occasions when he went into the market-town he would buy two or three books. These made his evenings pass quickly and pleasantly, and made him feel that he would not willingly change places with any man.

This order of things had existed about ten years, and seemed likely to go on uninterruptedly for ten years longer, when accident brought about a change. In getting over a stile hurriedly in his haste to catch a train, he slipped and fell with one leg twisted under him at a cruel angle. Lord St. Errol's carriage with Mrs. Ogilvie and Stella in it was passing at the time. The carriage was stopped at once, and the ladies got out to offer help. Unassisted they could do nothing, for he had sustained a compound fracture of the leg just below the knee. They remained with him, endeavoring to soothe him as best they could, while the carriage was sent on for medical aid and an ambulance.

The old sailor had the courage of his kind. He bore the agony without flinching or murmuring, and apologized profusely to them for presuming to light his pipe. When he had smoked in silence for a few minutes, intently regarding Stella the while, he suddenly asked :

“ May I venture to ask the names of you two ladies who are so kind to a poor old hulk like myself ? ”

They told him their names, and after looking scrutinizingly at Stella for a few minutes he turned his head away from them, and seemed steeped in thought. Had his head not been turned away, they would have seen that there were tears in his eyes.

The doctors and attendants from the hospital came on the scene almost immediately after this, and with many and courteous thanks he parted with Mrs. Ogilvie

and Stella. When he was saying good-by to the latter, his eyes fell on the locket that Stella wore, and his face grew paler even than the pain had made it. A question hovered on his lips, but he overcame the impulse to ask it. Had he asked the question, and been shown what the locket contained, he would have seen the miniature of a handsome young naval officer in the uniform of thirty years ago.

After this, a great change came over Mr. Ledger's life and habits. The broken leg laid him up for many a long day, and it soon became an understood thing that Stella should go and see him two or three times a week. He also admitted Lord St. Errol frequently, and took a great interest in the story of the way in which Stella had become the young peer's ward.

"And you know nothing more about her than this : that your predecessor took her to his home when she was a baby, and left her to your charge as his adopted child ?"

St. Errol nodded assent.

"That's it. That's all I know about the business. I'd give a good deal to find out something about her parentage, dear girl ! for she worries about her obscure origin a good deal. The fellow she's engaged to—fine young fellow he is, too—is quite indifferent about it. But Stella thinks that she is acting dishonorably in entering a family like the Bentiicks without being able to explain herself."

"Poor girl !" Mr. Ledger said sympathetically. Then, after a few moments, which he had occupied in moving as well as his broken leg would allow him into a position that put his face out of reach of St. Errol's observation, he went on : "I am very much interested

in what you told me the other day about that portrait. Depend upon it, the key to the romance lies there."

"I am afraid I shall never find the key."

"Perhaps, when I'm on my pins again, I may aid you in the search. I'm an old salt, and sailors learn to be very observant, you know."

"Thanks ; but it's a mystery of many years' standing, and I don't think, myself, it will ever be unraveled now."

"I feel for the poor girl very much—very much indeed," Mr. Ledger said emphatically. Then he was silent and thoughtful for some time, during which St. Errol amused himself by looking at a collection of queer weapons which had been collected from nearly every armed land under the sun. "Yes ; I have been a great traveler, and have fought in many a land," the old man said in answer to St. Errol's unspoken thought.

"What was your last appointment ?" St. Errol asked.

"Do you mean in the English Navy ?"

"Yes ; what other should I mean ?"

Mr. Ledger's face grew hard in a moment.

"I was dismissed the English Navy twenty years ago for a breach of discipline that I was compelled to commit. A junior officer insulted and struck me. I returned the blow, and the result was that he received promotion and I was dismissed the service. He was my junior, you see, and I had the reputation (pretty well deserved) of being a hot-tempered fellow."

He turned his eyes fully and steadily on St. Errol, and the latter almost started under the glance ; it reminded him so forcibly of some one else, but who the "some one" was he could not determine.

"I am sorry that I should inadvertently have broached the subject," St. Errol said apologetically.

"The subject has long ceased to be a painful one—that is, the subject of my having been booted from the service. But there are circumstances connected with that period which were exquisitely painful to me at the time, and which prick and sting now whenever I recall them. Ten years of reckless activity did not blunt my memory of them. These ten years of solitude that I have passed here, 'the world forgetting, by the world forgot,' have failed to blunt the remembrance of them. Hand me that pipe and tobacco-jar, my good fellow."

St. Errol did as he was requested, and then went to the window and looked out on the fruit and vegetable garden.

"I have often seen you at work down there when I've been riding past," he said, "and I've always had a great desire to know you. I only wish our friendship had been brought about under pleasanter circumstances for you."

"Oh, that's all the fortune of war. I am only glad that *any* circumstances should have made me acquainted with you—and your ward. Will you ask Miss St. Errol to come and see me soon?" he added, as St. Errol held out his hand to say good-by.

"She'll come gladly."

"She's a sweet girl. I have only known one other as sweet in the course of my life. I have one or two old-world curiosities—miniatures, and bits of jewelry—that I should like to show her."

Again, as he spoke, his eyes and expression reminded St. Errol of some one else whom he had known. But

the reminder was vague and misty, and he could not localize it.

After this there was rarely a day on which either Stella or St. Errol did not go to The Hulk, to try and lighten the irksomeness of the "cramped, cabined, and confined" life Mr. Ledger was perforce leading. St. Errol smoked and yarned with him, and Stella read the war and other news to him while he intently watched every variation in her mobile little face. But he said no more about showing her his old miniatures and other curiosities.

Captain Bentick's first letter from Natal was written in exuberant spirits, and Stella responded with all her soul and vitality to the call upon her sympathies. One passage in his letter was such public family property that she read it out to them.

"Among other fellows outside the regiment whom I knew more or less on the *Medusa* was Mr. Stanley, who was with you at Chatsworth that day. He's a ripping good fellow, and ought to have been a soldier. He has got the billet of the poor chap who was killed the other day on one of the London dailies, and has gone on." At this point the writer went on to deal with other matters, and could not finish his letter till two days later. In this postscript he told them that news had just come of Stanley having been severely wounded. "But he has been sent to one of the hospitals, and is being well looked after," he concluded.

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Soon after this it became necessary that Mrs. Ogilvie should go up to town to look after her own household and belongings. At first it was proposed that Stella

should go to the Benticks, and pass with them the time of her chaperone's absence. But the girl's gratitude and loyalty interposed and nullified this proposal.

"Mrs. Ogilvie has sacrificed the routine life that was second nature to her for my sake, and now I must go and look after her. She will have a great deal to do that I can do for her, and spare her a lot of trouble and exertion. She is rheumatic, and ought not to go out in fogs and damp or in snow and frost. I am strong, and none of these things will hurt me."

"You won't take advantage of your liberty to make a bolt for the stage, will you?" St. Errol asked laughingly.

"No ; but I shall take advantage of my liberty to try and get some paying London engagements for Mrs. Clifford. She tells me her husband is very much better, only hipped. He wants her to work, and doesn't like her to leave him ; in fact, he wants her to make bricks without straw."

"What a narrow-minded beggar he must be !" St. Errol said savagely.

"What made her marry him, I wonder ?" Stella conjectured.

"Don't set yourself that problem to solve, Stella. It's the most unsatisfying one, even when solved in such a case as the Cliffords."

"But you'll worry every one you know to give her engagements, and get their friends to do the same, won't you, Mrs. Ogilvie ? The Benticks have given me some introductions that may be useful."

"There won't be much going on for some time, I fear. The interests of too many thousands are involved in

this business in South Africa," St. Errol put in. "Poor old Stanley!" he went on, "I wish he hadn't gone off without beat of drum. I'd like to have seen him off and said good-by to him."

"Perhaps—who knows?—as he went out in the *Medusa*, he might have been quite close to us when we were saying good-by to Basil," Stella said musingly. "Now I must go and tell the Benticks about *my* letter, and call in to see Mr. Ledger, and say good-by for a wee bit."

"He'll miss you awfully," St. Errol said.

"And I shall miss him. It seems so odd, but I've got to quite love him. Do you know that he must have lost a daughter, and that I must be something like her. Has he ever told you, St. Errol? Has he ever had a wife and daughter?"

"No. He often seems on the verge of making a confidence, but he dries up suddenly and speaks about his garden or his goat, or something far away from what he's had in his mind a minute before."

"He's fretting about that garden, I know he is," Stella said earnestly. "He said yesterday that he knew that boy wouldn't have the ground ready for the spring vegetables. I thought very likely not, for the boy is nearly always out on a trolley."

"He won't let me send a gardener over to see to things. He's awfully independent."

"And altogether interesting," Stella said warmly.

Her new "old friend" bore the news of her approaching departure bravely.

"Is St. Errol going too?" he asked, as his heart sank within him at the prospect of the dullness and desolation which would be his portion during the absence

of the two bright young elements who had recently been introduced into his life.

“Only for a fortnight.”

“And you—for how long?”

“A month, or perhaps six weeks.”

Mr. Ledger sighed.

“The time will seem long to me. It’s many a long day since a bright young face has blessed me with its smiles.”

“Mr. Ledger——” Stella began ; then she stopped in confusion.

“You were going to ask me something,” he said gently. “What is it?”

“I was wondering if you had a daughter?”

He shook his head.

“I don’t know,” he murmured.

“Have you ever had a daughter?” Stella persisted.

“I don’t know,” he replied, this time in such evident mental pain that Stella’s self-reproach for having indulged in such curiosity brought the tears to her eyes.

“Don’t cry, don’t cry ; I could never stand the sight of tears in a woman’s eyes. Some day, when you come back, I’ll tell you a story—the beginning of one, at least. Perhaps you may help me to find the end of it.”

“A story—a real true one? That will be delicious.”

“It may be—the end may be. Who knows?” he said abstractedly. Then, with an abrupt change of manner, he went on : “Look out into the garden, my dear, and tell me if that torment of a boy is doing anything to the ground.”

“No, he’s not. When I came here, I met him riding down the hill on his trolley. Why won’t you let one of our men come over and see to the garden?”

“Do *you* wish me to do that?”

“Of course I do,” she said coaxingly. “St. Errol and all of us wish it.”

“Then tell St. Errol to send his man—a man who will stand no nonsense from that young rascal, who’ll find I haven’t forgotten how to use a rope’s-end when I get about on my pins again.”

The warlike mood, though it was only aroused by a naughty little idle boy, strung him up, and when Stella took leave of him he was in a comparatively cheerful frame of mind.

As soon as she was gone, he rang for the nurse, and when she came he sent for his housekeeper, and delivered himself of the longest speech he had ever addressed to her.

“Take this key, go to the dining-room, and unlock the left-hand top drawer of my writing-table. There you will find a crimson morocco case; bring it up to me. Lock the drawer, and don’t move one of the papers under the case by a hair’s breadth, or I shall know it when I go down again.”

She smiled grimly, said “Yes, sir,” and was back in a few minutes with the crimson morocco case.

“Both of you go till I ring for you,” he commanded; and they obeyed him gladly.

“He’s a real old hunk,” the nurse said, as they seated themselves to tea.

The housekeeper nodded.

“Ain’t bad to live with, though, I should think?”

The housekeeper nodded again.

“He seems to have taken to the young lady from the castle. Do you know why?”

“No, I don’t!” the housekeeper said with laconic

ferocity ; “ and what’s more, if I did know, I shouldn’t tell you ! You’re a gossip, that’s what you are ! ”

The nurse was a buxom, middle-aged woman, of a genial turn of mind, and it hurt her a good deal to be repulsed in this crude way.

“ I meant no harm,” she said amiably. “ I was only going to say that the other day he chanced to fall asleep while he was looking at a little picture in a gold frame. I saw it, too.”

“ Who was it ? ” said the housekeeper sourly.

“ Oh, I won’t gossip,” said the nurse suavely ; “ I’ll just read the paper till I’m wanted.”

CHAPTER XX.

STELLA WANTS TO KNOW.

STANLEY was disappointed and disgusted. The nurse who was told off to attend to him was young, pretty, and frivolous. From the moment she approached him he felt repellent towards her, and when she began flirting at him in a semi-professional way repugnance became detestation.

She had sweet blue eyes and hazel-nut-colored hair, and she blinked the eyes and crimped the hair at him so obviously for two days that his patience gave out. The result was that she went to attend a younger man, and a woman of forty took Stanley in hand.

She was an unmarried woman, good as gold, and full of motherly instincts—fair and fleshy, very tidy, a born enemy to dust and dirt of every description. Dull partly because she had never been given the opportunity of being anything else, and partly because, if she had been given the opportunity, she would have been unable to take it.

But she had the atmosphere of comfortableness about her. She never spilt beef-tea into a saucer, nor let a fire go low. In fact she was a person born to minister to man's creature comforts, and being merely a man Stanley appreciated her.

Nurse Walsh she was called, and she had a coo in her voice. Clever, certainly, as far as everything connected with her trade went, but common. Lacking (happily for herself) the fine instincts of the gentlewoman, but able to prate about herself as if she were really one.

She played her patient rather neatly, considering what *he* was and *she* was. She massaged him, poor fellow! and while he was under the influence of this direful treatment she told him what he ought to do when he got well.

“You want a wife, that’s what it is, when you get well, sir. Why, your socks are all in holes, and I’m sure the way your vests and drawers have been treated in the wash is too shameful——”

He turned his head aside, he was so weary of pity. It did not come to him under the guise of loveliness. She was stout and unattractive. He turned his face to the wall, and tried to sleep. Instead of sleeping, he grew feverish, and thought of Stella.

Nurse Walsh was very patient—patient and tender and untiring in her service; and he was grateful, and when a man is grateful he is apt to do himself a wrong rather than not be generous.

The outcome of his gratitude was her love. The passion came to her late in life, but it was a genuine thing. The fine, handsome fellow, who was at least fifteen years her junior, had become so precious to her during the days when his life hung upon a thread, and he had been entirely dependent on her, that she would freely have given up her own life to serve him. He was unlike any one she had ever met, for though she was a woman of wealth, she had never enjoyed the

social advantages that wealth frequently gives. The daughter of a money-lender who had lived like a miser, she had held herself aloof from her own class, and never succeeded in getting into a better one. When her father died, and she found herself an heiress, her loneliness became unbearable, her idleness a sin. So she trained as a hospital nurse, and did good, honest, wholesome work in a contented, peaceful frame of mind, until Stanley in an evil hour for them both was consigned to her care.

Her devotion and sympathy were so lavishly given that, as the days wore on, and the fever passed, leaving him a convalescent, he could not refrain from giving her crumbs of comfort in the shape of warm, grateful words. He was not happy himself, but it soothed him to see that he could make her supremely happy by a phrase that cost him no effort to utter ; and Stella being lost to him, why should he deprive this humbly adoring woman of what would make the world a paradise to her ?

Unhappiness is the occasional portion of every one of us. But that it is so is poor consolation to any individual when being attacked by his or her special form of suffering. Your unhappiness may result from causes which seem insignificant indeed when compared with those which cast a cloud over your neighbor's brow. Still, the defeat of your pet project does not make it a smaller thing to you. You are not one whit the less miserable about it because some other man or woman has heavier cares heaped on his or her head. We each one of us object definitely and strongly to bearing our portion of man's lot here below—"labor and sorrow." And the universal mind must be considerably better

regulated than it is at present before we shall derive satisfaction or consolation from the reflection that other people are bearing heavier burdens.

Stanley was very unhappy on account of the loss of Stella St. Errol. It was being borne in upon his mind now, as he was lying there in a state of forced inactivity, that he had only himself to thank for this mental misery. He had feared his fate too much, and while he was hesitating, a bolder, prompter man stepped in and won what he—Stanley—had not made an effort to secure. So now he was very unhappy, and though he did not go so far as to consider his life blighted, he did regard himself a very much broken man, one who would most likely just drift on and do little good either for others or himself with that life.

It was while he was in this vein that his nurse's ministrations struck a sympathetic chord in him. She was very thoughtful, gentle, and soothing. No mother could have anticipated his every wish and want with more affectionate consideration. It is true that she was neither young nor pretty, but youth and beauty had failed him signally, and this woman was evidently prepared to give everything, and apparently not expect anything in return. He dwelt upon this idea so long and persistently that it became a familiar and almost pleasant one to him. He acted upon it one day when he awoke, and found her crying bitterly by his side.

She was so obviously embarrassed by his making the discovery of her emotion that he was more than ever touched by her unselfishness. He in turn became the comforter, and fulfilled his office so perfectly that before that interview was over she was shedding tears of happiness.

"I have outlived romance—we have both done that, I think—but without it we may be a fairly happy and comfortable couple," he said ; and though there was no ardor in the speech, she was quite satisfied with it.

Thus the matter was settled, and as soon as Stanley was well enough they were married by one of the chaplains to the forces.

Of course, she gave up the nursing which had been her great object in life before she met her young husband. Her means were ample, and she had a natural and womanly desire to go back to England and exhibit her young husband to her friends. However, this Stanley would not do. He meant to remain till the war was over, or, at any rate, while his health held out. This was the first crux, and he very soon forgot it, but she did not.

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Meantime, Mrs. Ogilvie had taken Stella away with her, first to town for a week or two, and then to the cottage. During the week or two in town, Stella and Mrs. Clifford were together whenever the latter could get away from her ailing, irritable husband.

Mr. Clifford had met his young millionaire friend again, and the latter had agreed willingly to advance a few hundreds more in the good cause of setting Mr. Clifford "firmly on his legs again," as the latter expressed it. This being arranged, the club saw more of him and his wife less than would have been the case had the millionaire friend been less generous.

One evening Mrs. Clifford was in Stella's room when the latter was dressing for a ball, and her attention was attracted by the locket which Stella wore.

"I have one just like it ; I must show what's in mine,"

she said ; and she opened the locket and disclosed the portrait of a young and lovely woman. " That was my dear mother," she said. " She died when I was nine years old, and I was away in France at school, and had not seen her for three years. Why, Stella, you are like her ! much more like her than I, her own daughter, am. Isn't it funny ! "

" Very," Stella said thoughtfully. " She died when I was quite a little baby, and I never saw her at all. Lord St. Errol taught me to call him papa, but I was not his child. He gave me this locket and the miniature in it when I was about ten, and told me it was a likeness of a relation of mine, and that I might keep it if I liked, but he would never tell me what relation. But I think it must be my father."

The likeness Stella wore, as has already been told, was of a young naval man. Mrs. Clifford looked at it with interest and perplexity.

" I seem to have a shadowy recollection of some one like it, but I suppose I am mistaken," she said ; and then the subject dropped, and Stella went away to her ball, where she quickly forgot all about it ; but Mrs. Clifford pondered over it, and a thousand conjectures fashioned themselves in her brain.

Soon after they went down to the cottage, where they found the pony as fat and Jem as well inclined to have his own way as ever, and while they were there they heard of Stanley's marriage.

The news did not affect Stella as much as it would have done had she not been in a state of dire apprehension concerning the safety of the man she loved. Still, it did affect her more than a little. She knew that he had loved her very much, though he had never

told her so, and it is a blow to feminine vanity, if not to any softer feeling, when a man goes off and seeks solace in another woman's love. She heard nothing of Mrs. Stanley's personality, and concluded that he had been caught in the rebound by some young and pretty woman who had won her way to his heart through his wounds.

"I feel sure she is a designing thing," she said to Mrs. Ogilvie; and Mrs. Ogilvie ventured to say that hospital nurses were not more designing than any other class of women. "Oh, I don't know about that! You see, they have so many opportunities of inveigling a man when he's weak and wants a lot of care. I don't say that Mrs. Stanley is one of this class; indeed, I hope she is not. But I do say that she must have gone more than half way to meet him, for him to have married her so soon, so very soon."

"So soon after what, dear?"

"After leaving—all of us. He hasn't even written to St. Errol to tell him what he has done."

"Young men will do things impulsively."

"You're thinking of Basil? But that was quite different. He had not been seeming to be in love with any one else just before he met me."

"And Mr. Stanley certainly had—I admit that."

Stella flushed.

"I ought not to have said that; it was horribly mean and dog-in-the-mangerish of me. I'll never say such a thing again, and when he brings his wife back I hope we shall all be great friends. I have no doubt she's a charming woman; he is so nice in every way that he deserves a sweet wife. I shall be quite disappointed if she is not very pretty, and graceful, and fascinating."

"Now you are going from one extreme to the other."

"But this last is a good, generous extreme, isn't it?"

"She may be admirably suited to be Mr. Stanley's wife without being either pretty, or fascinating, or even graceful."

"I shall be so sorry for him if she isn't all three. Shall I write and congratulate him?"

"Wait a little, and hear what your guardian says."

"But if I defer doing it he will think me cool and indifferent about his happiness, and I'm sure I'm not that."

"Well, as your doing so can't do any harm, I will say yes."

"Well, I'll write at once and give him all our news, and tell him about The Hulk and that dear old Mr. Ledger. I wonder if he misses us all very much? I quite miss him."

"He is missing you, I am sure. He told me that you had come like a rose into his life."

"Poor dear man! I wonder what his story is. I asked him one day if he had a daughter, and he said he 'didn't know.' He looked so pained when he said it, I thought at once he must have had some great sorrow. I wish he would tell us, don't you? We might be able to comfort him."

"I think we may do that without probing the secrets of his heart. It is sometimes more merciful not to lift the veil."

"I should so like to make him happier: that's why I want to know. It's not curiosity. Now I'll write to Mr. Stanley. I wonder where they will live when they come back to England."

She wrote her letter, and it was a model of affection-

ate frankness and friendship. It was such an effortless letter, too, that the recipient could not but feel that it came spontaneously from the writer's heart.

Later on we shall see how it was received, and what its effect was upon the lately-married pair.

Soon after this, Mrs. Clifford had a little holiday, which she spent at the cottage with Stella. Her husband was very much engaged in "spotting winners" and going to races, so, not being essential to him, he gave her leave to go and stay with her friends.

"Perhaps that girl may be useful to us some day, so you may as well cultivate her," he said.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CASKET.

WHILE Mr. Ledger's housekeeper and nurse were wrangling with the scarcely-veiled *mock* civility of their class over the possibilities contained in Mr. Ledger's past life, the crimson morocco case and the little picture framed in gold which the nurse had "chanced to see" when her charge had fallen asleep, that gentleman was taking out the contents of the little casket with trembling hands, and looking at them with sad eyes.

First came a baby's robe of such exquisitely fine lace that it could have been drawn through an average-sized wedding-ring. Then a pair of epaulettes, showing the rank in the Royal Navy of their wearer—that of a Lieutenant, namely. Under these were Maltese gold trinkets of more or less value. Protected by all these materials were three cases containing miniatures. The larger one had two in it, a fine handsome man and a charmingly pretty woman. Another held a finely-painted one of a solemn-eyed pretty child of four or five. The third was that of a grim-looking man, and under it was a slip of paper, with the words written in ink, that was yellow and speckled with age: "From one who will not fail you when the one you have chosen does."

His hand did not tremble as he took this slip of paper up, nor did his eyes look sad as he read it, and looked at the little portrait of the man who had written it.

“It was finding *this* drove me mad, and was my ruin, though I knew all the time she was as good as gold and as pure as a lily. But she kept his name from me : that’s what did the mischief. She wouldn’t be ‘disloyal,’ as she called it, to a man she had refused for my sake. If she had told me his name, I would have gone to the ends of the earth to seek him, and would have killed him in a fair fight. But she was firm as a rock, and as true as steel to him ; and now I don’t know whether she is alive or not, or whether I have a child.”

He did not say, or even mutter, a word of this. He just thought it sometimes in silence, sometimes in a whispered word or two. He had brooded over the subject for many a long year, but he had never given himself the indulgence of such luxury of sorrow and remorse as he was enjoying now in overhauling the contents of the morocco casket.

By and by he began to repack it, and for an instant or two he hesitated as to whether or not he should replace the miniature last described in its old position. Then a curious feeling possessed him, and it was that perhaps this obnoxious unknown had kept his word and been good to his (Ledger’s) wife, when he, her legal protector, had deserted her. He thought :

“Some one must have helped her, poor girl ! when I sheered off, like the fool I was ! She was too proud to appeal to me, and she was gone when I went to find her. Merciful heaven ! where *had* she gone that from that day to this I have never found her ? Perhaps he

didn't fail her. Perhaps he kept my wife from starving. Oh, I'm a weak old fool, and it's all through that pretty, fair-haired Miss St. Errol being so kind to me."

Then he went on to think what an unselfish, fine, high nature she had, to come out and seem bright and cheerful, in order to brighten and cheer up an "old hunks" like himself, when she had such a weight of woful anxiety to bear about her lover at the front.

When he had carefully replaced the whole contents the casket, he locked it, and rang the bell.

"Take this back to where you found it. When you've done that, you may send the nurse."

The housekeeper lingered for a moment or two, while Mr. Ledger was picking up his newspaper and adjusting his spectacles.

"What do you want? Is that young scamp of a boy out on his trolley and not doing the garden again?" he asked sharply.

"No, sir. It's the nurse."

"What of her?"

"She's a gossip."

"How do *you* know?"

"She says you looked at a picture in a gold frame. She ain't fit to be here."

Mr. Ledger laid the paper down, took off his spectacles, and looked at her.

"She will not gossip here again. Send her to me."

The old sailor's brows were knitted in a way she had never seen before, not even when he had caught the scamp of a boy out in some breach of duty. She opened her lips to speak, but the words did not come, then marched out of the room in her usual silent respectful manner, and sent the nurse to him. When she came,

he received her with the stern serenity for which he had been somewhat famous professionally. It looked like a calm, but those who had known him knew that beneath that calm a tempest was raging.

"You have committed a breach of discipline. You are dismissed The Hulk, and will leave here within the hour. Bring your account up to a month from to-day."

"But, sir——" the bewildered woman was beginning.

"Don't answer your superior officer! You're dismissed."

She began to cry with rage.

"You're worse than judge, jury, and court-martial all rolled into one!" she gasped out.

"You're dismissed the ship. Clear out!" he said; and she cleared out with a promptitude she had never exhibited in all her varied experiences.

Before she was well out of the room Mr. Ledger had put on his spectacles and picked up his paper. But he was not reading; he was thinking.

"Now, if that dear girl had been here, she wouldn't have let me play the martinet in this way."

Punctually to the moment, half an hour later, the housekeeper brought his beef-tea. Not a word was said by either of them about the little incident which had broken the monotony of the morning. Mr. Ledger handed her a telegram, addressed to the head-surgeon of the hospital, with the words:

"Send that young scamp off with it at once. He must be back in half an hour and report himself."

"He shall be back, sir," the housekeeper answered, with a somewhat vindictive compression of the lips.

She had been censured for the shortcomings of one fellow-creature already that day, and she was not dis-

posed to repeat the experience. As her master handed back the empty cup to her, he asked :

“Vegetables packed?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Who by?”

“The boy, sir.”

“Neatly done—all ship-shape, eh?”

“No, sir.”

“Then, why the deuce don’t you do them yourself?” he asked irascibly.

“I will, sir.”

“Do it until I can take command of the ship again.”

“Yes, sir.”

She went as she was bidden back to her own quarters, and witnessed the departure of nurse No. 1 and the boy with the telegram with supreme but suppressed pleasure. Then, the house being so tidy and dustless that there was no more for her to do in it, she sat down to knit one of the long line of stockings with which she kept her master supplied. She knitted these thoughts into the stocking :

“The same old, cold, fierce temper ; the same kind, true heart ; the same real gentleman that he always was. My poor lamb ! if you’d only had a bit of patience with him—well, *he* wouldn’t be here now, and *you* wouldn’t be in your grave, and *I* shouldn’t be ignorant of where that grave is. ’Tis a tangled skein, as I’ve read somewhere about something else ; but if I can ever wind it off straight, I will.”

She sat there knitting and thinking these thoughts for an hour, until the reprobate boy came back with the great tidings that all the fruit and vegetables Mr. Ledger could spare were to be sent to Mrs. Ogilvie at

her town address, "as she couldn't get any nigh so good in London."

"That's all through me," said the boy. "That's because of the way I work the ground. He ought to raise my wages—that's what old Marlinspike ought to do!"

"You tell him that! My orders are that you are to go up to him at once. Don't stand and shiver; go up to the master *at once!*"

The boy wished he had never spoken his foolish mind or lived. Nevertheless, he obeyed the housekeeper's behest, and went up with wobbling knees into his (physically) powerless master's presence.

"Have you sold the vegetables to the usual customers?"

"Yes, sir."

"You young rascal, you packed them untidily!"

The boy put a cuff up to his eye to represent tears, and at the sight, though he knew it was humbug, Mr. Ledger repented of his determination to give that boy such a wiggling as would influence him for his own good for life. He remembered the severity with which he had treated the gossiping nurse, and of how he had thought that if Stella St. Errol had been by he would not have played the martinet. So he overcame the boy by giving him a shilling, and telling him to "go and get himself some oranges." The boy took the shilling, and got himself various condiments at the village shop, which made him sick and ill. He couldn't do a stroke of work in the garden for two days; but as the housekeeper was mute on the matter, Mr. Ledger nursed the happy delusion that his control of temper had made that boy dutiful and good.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FAILURE OF CAPTAIN BENTICK.

CAPTAIN BASIL BENTICK, in saving the life of his Colonel at Modder River, nearly lost his life. His wounds were of such a terribly severe character that he was invalided home, and on board the transport he got a wound of a far more serious nature than the one he had received at Modder River.

The Colonel whose life he had saved came home in the same ship, and with him came his daughter. Her gratitude to the brave young fellow who had rescued her father was boundless. She was young, beautiful, and gifted with that peculiar fascination which is the inheritance of so many Irish girls. A Dublin girl with that subtle grace of manner which had come down to her from a Spanish grandmother. Before they had been together three days his admiration for her was as boundless as her gratitude to him.

Captain Bentick was a gentleman; not only this, but he had the fine, chivalrous instincts of a soldier. Moreover, he was a clever fellow, who could write stinging articles and stirring poems. Kathleen Devoran was clever, too, and delightfully appreciative. He deferred telling her that he was engaged to be married until it was too late. He awoke to the fact one day

that not only was he in love with her, but she was desperately in love with him. He could not help but feel that he was acting a coward's part towards both Stella and Kathleen. But do what he would, struggle as he did, he knew that his heart had failed him where Stella was concerned, and that Miss Devoran was the love of his life.

Then another and more painful complication arose. Colonel Devoran caught enteric fever, and sank fast. When he was dying he spoke out openly to Basil Bentick.

"I am leaving my only child alone in the world as far as relations on my side and her mother's are concerned. But I can see how things are between Kate and you. Make her a kind husband, Bentick, and God's blessing be upon you as you deal with her."

That night Kathleen Devoran was an orphan, crying bitterly in the arms of the only friend she had left in the world, and Captain Bentick was on the verge of an attack of brain fever. His course was not clear to him. His conscience was in a state of uproar. "Why had he been born?" he asked himself, to have been the cause of bringing such confusion into the lives of these two sweet girls? The question was one to which no one answer could be given. Still, something must be done—something must be settled when they landed at Plymouth. It tortured him to think that perhaps his people would bring Stella there to meet him. And his heart belonged to another woman now, and he was in honor bound to both of them, for how could he disregard the dying request of his chief—of the Colonel whose life he had saved at the risk of his own?

Kathleen Devoran was very ill after her father's

death, and every one turned to Captain Bentick for guidance and instructions concerning her. He could not disregard the trust which had been confided to him by her dying father. At the same time Stella was waiting for him in England—Stella, for whom he had conceived a headstrong passion (in the course of a day) which had now exhausted itself. What a cur he would show up to be in the eyes of all the men in his regiment ! What a defaulter from the ranks of chivalry, honor, and honesty ! How he lamented that he had not shared the fate of hundreds of better men who had stopped the Boers' bullets ! How he dreaded meeting the uncle and aunt who had been like parents to him ! And having gone through all these sensations, he had to go back and go through them again, and each day brought him nearer to Plymouth—and Stella.

One thing was certain, and that was that Stella must not be deluded, or have any well-meaning dust thrown in her eyes in a poor attempt to spare her feelings for a time. The bitter, shameful truth would have to be told to her sooner or later—the sooner, the better for every one. But after it was told what kind of place would he hold among men of honor ?

There were moments when he almost resolved to cast his life's happiness and Kate Devoran's to the winds, and sacrifice both on the altar of his pledged word of honor. Then the sharp reminder came that every one on the ship thought that he and Kate were engaged. There was her reputation to be thought of before everything else. He was in a cleft stick with a vengeance.

Meanwhile, Kate was so touchingly and helplessly reliant on him that he could not bring himself up to the point of telling that away in England there was a girl

waiting who had a prior claim on him. If he broke his vows and disregarded this claim, he would be cut by the county. He could not face it, he resolved, one minute; the next, a look into Kate's sweet, Irish gray eyes would upset the high resolve, and cast him adrift upon a sea of doubt and uncertainty again.

As the steamer neared Plymouth, where they were to land, this doubt and uncertainty increased tenfold. He knew that his uncle and aunt would be there to meet their precious idol, and he also knew that in their mistaken idolatry they would be sure to bring the girl to whom he was engaged with them. What would they feel, poor old people! when they found their idol shattered by his own hand?

When they came into port, a tug came off to meet them with letters and telegrams. One from his uncle informed him that "they would be at the landing-place in a carriage to meet him." His heart went lower and lower at this. He had already told Kate that he should "put her under the care of his aunt until——" He did not say until what, but she took it for granted that it would be until he married her.

Kate was so weak that she had to be carried up to the carriage in which the joyfully-expectant trio were awaiting their wounded warrior's return. He told the men who were carrying her in a deck-chair to wait while he stopped to explain her appearance there. But she was near enough to see that all three occupants of the carriage embraced him, and that one was a young and pretty woman. "What could it mean?" she wondered, for Basil had never spoken to her of either a sister or a cousin.

"I must ask you to take care of my late Colonel's

daughter, aunt," he began awkwardly. "He died on the voyage, and she has no relations or friends in England. I promised to look after her, poor girl! she has been very ill."

Instantly Mrs. Bentick's warm sympathies were aroused. They had read with tears and smiles mingled (in the curious way they do mingle when hope and fear are awake in our hearts) of Basil's gallant rescue of his Colonel, and it touched them all deeply to hear that he had died on the way home, and that his daughter stood alone in the world.

"Let her have the seat in the carriage, and Basil and I will go in a cab," Stella pleaded, and the plan was promptly decided upon, for what could be more natural than that the betrothed lovers should wish to be alone together in the first hour of their meeting after he had gone through such peril, and she such anxiety?

But Kate's brow clouded when it was proposed to her. She had "the right to Basil," she felt, and she felt it to be a piece of heartless injustice that he should go off in a cab alone with a young, pretty, forward woman who was not his sister, but who had embraced him in a more or less sisterly way. The fascinating little Irish beauty had a bit of the fury about her, and her nature was such an intensely jealous one that any slight, even if it existed merely in her imagination, roused that fury to fever pitch.

She was very pale and frail still, and though she had no mourning yet, her black dress and wraps made her look paler still. But the color leapt back into her face with almost cruel heat and force when Basil Bentick followed Stella into the cab.

"Basil ought not to have left me the first day we are

here," she began fretfully, as they drove off; and though the old people were surprised at the familiar mention of their nephew, they overlooked the mistake because of her youth and beauty and friendlessness, and proceeded to comfort and cosset her, and to tell her that she would soon have other friends. "She might reckon themselves among the number," they said.

"But no one can be what Basil is to me," she said haughtily. "He hasn't been able to tell you before. but I will tell you now. He and I are engaged——"

"Engaged!" broke from the lips of Mr. and Mrs. Bentick simultaneously.

"Yes," Kathleen said, almost with defiance. She was annoyed by the tone of mixed shock and disapprobation with which they had uttered the one word. "Yes, engaged. Poor dear papa knew how fond we were of each other, and so when he was dying"—here she burst out crying, and had to pause for a few minutes, during which pause the dear old people looked at each other in speechless agony—"so when he was dying," Kathleen resumed, "he said, oh! about loving Basil as a son, and hoped he would be a good husband to me. We couldn't tell you before, because we were at sea, you know. And now, oh! don't be angry with me. Basil and I love each other so much. Don't be angry with us!"

The girl burst out afresh, and with aching hearts they had to play the parts of consolers, while they themselves were in dire need of consolation. While Kathleen was absorbed in her wo, they arranged that not a word of this must be breathed until they had learnt the whole story from Basil. The poor girl was evidently terribly weak and sadly excitable. She might

possibly have mistaken his words, and assumed a position that Basil had never given her the right to assume. They would give him the benefit of the doubt, and "get Miss Devoran away to a bedroom with as little delay as possible." This they said aloud to each other as they drew up at the door of the Grand Hotel, and Kathleen was too weak to gainsay them. So when Captain Bentick and Stella arrived a few minutes later, the fair intruder was safely ensconced in her bedroom, lying half asleep on a lounge.

Immediate danger was averted, Mr. and Mrs. Bentick hoped. Their hopes were but half-hearted ones, however, for Basil was strangely depressed during dinner, and Stella was feverishly excited and almost gay. One significant speech she made that distressed them, and made Captain Bentick feel worse than he had ever felt in his life.

"The voyage has been a trying one to Basil, auntie. Now that he has come home, we must do everything that every one can do to make him happy."

"You can make him happier than any one else, my darling girl," Mr. Bentick said with some heat, and Stella winced a little, but recovered herself in a moment, and said :

"At any rate I shall try ; you're sure of that, are you not, Basil ?"

He could not answer her. He felt as if his heart was breaking.

It was an awkward time after dinner, and more painfully awkward still when Mrs. Bentick and Stella found themselves alone in the private sitting-room. For then Stella flung herself into Mrs. Bentick's arms, and sobbed out :

“It’s over—all over !”

“Tell me,” Mrs. Bentick managed to say, and then Stella lifted her head and spoke out proudly :

“Don’t you see ? He doesn’t love me any longer. When we met he would not meet my lips, and driving back here just now he was so silent and miserable that he nearly broke my heart. I have lost his heart, and I won’t keep the promise of his hand.”

“Our boy, our Basil, to have done this !” Mrs. Bentick wailed.

“He can’t help it ; we can’t help it ; but we can bear it.”

“Has he told you this ?”

“No, oh no ! There was no need for him to tell me. I read it as plainly as if it had been printed in a book. It’s Miss Devoran, of course. I felt it the moment I saw him look at her.”

“It will break my heart. I believed him to be the soul of honor.”

“Honor would keep him to me, I have no doubt, for he is the soul of honor. But his love has gone from me. I want him to be happy in his own way ; and I will try to be happy in mine.”

“There is not much prospect of happiness for any of us after this, I fear,” Mrs. Bentick said sadly. “How shall I look at our boy after this ? How shall we ever face your guardian and Mrs. Ogilvie ?”

“I’ll teach you how to do it,” Stella said thoughtfully. “Now I’m going to bed ; I don’t think I could see any one else to-night. To-morrow I will write to Captain Bentick and release him ; and you will be kind to the girl, won’t you ?”

But Mrs. Bentick was not prepared to give that prom-

ise. Indeed, she could not tolerate the sight of the interloper, and would not have done it if Stella had not pleaded the girl's absolute friendlessness.

"I should wish her to make the whole of the rest of the world her friends if she had only let Basil alone. As it is, I feel sure she must have made the first advances. He, an engaged man, would never have done it."

* * * * *

"I will see Basil before I go," Stella said the next morning, coming down equipped for her journey back to Mrs. Ogilvie's cottage. "He needn't mind seeing me; I won't say anything to hurt him."

"He is thoroughly abased; his madness has lost him his self-respect."

"*She* doesn't know about me, does she?"

"No, nothing; secrecy and deception characterize the whole affair according to my idea and yours. I am not disposed to judge Basil harshly."

"Nor am I," Stella said firmly, "not even when my heart is aching so horribly. Oh, poor Basil! poor Basil! Some dreadful glamour must have been thrown over him, for he *did* love me dearly. Now I will see him, and then I shall be ready to go."

The humiliation and abasement of a man she loves is never a pleasant sight to a woman, however badly he may have treated her. She shrank from the sight of the spectacle he offered to her gaze when presently he came at her bidding.

With his head lowered on his breast, his face ashy white, and with an undescribable air of shame and sorrow about him, he was a pitiable contrast indeed to the gallant, debonair young soldier who had laid his

heart at her feet and pleaded so rapturously for hers in return.

Involuntarily she drew herself up and her eyes blazed. The thought had crossed her mind that he would not have dared to treat her in this way if she had a "name of her own, or a man of her own class to defend her." But she speedily dismissed this unworthy thought, and remembered that no real brother could have shown her more affection and honor than St. Errol had done, and that no mother could have loved her more dearly than Mrs. Ogilvie did.

"You have come to say good-by? I am glad of that," she said softly, and at the words he advanced a step or two nearer to her, and knelt at her feet, covering his face with his hands.

"Oh, not that, not that, Basil!" she said, with desperate earnestness; "don't let my last sight of you, my last thought of you, be that you humbled yourself."

"If I didn't humble myself in your presence I should be a greater scoundrel and villain than I am," he groaned. "I have been a mad fool, but I am not quite a blackguard!"

She had meant to say a few words in kindness, but now she found she could not speak. The sight of his abject misery was worse to bear than her own sore sorrow.

"Get up, get up!" she cried, and held her hands out to raise him from his kneeling posture, and while she was in the act of doing it the door was opened violently, and Kathleen Devoran burst into the room.

She was beside herself with fury, and demanded such a lot of extraordinary things in yells of rage that very soon nearly every one in the hotel was aware that

a young lady, who was either demented or suffering from brain-fever, was an inmate of it. Among other things, she proclaimed aloud to every one who listened to her that unless Basil got a special license and married her at once she would destroy herself, and added the terrible words, "I'm not the first of my family who has done it on being thwarted." Under the influence of jealousy, the fascinating, gentle girl who had cajoled him into loving her on the voyage home became a relentless, dangerous creature, with neither justice nor mercy in her composition.

Under these circumstances the Benticks thought the best thing they could do would be to take Miss Devoran with them; but for once they were stern, or rather firm, with their nephew. Nothing would induce them to hear of his returning with them or his seeing Miss Deveran until he had found out something about her family.

Her threat of suicide, though it was uttered in a burst of mental passion and physical weakness, had made a distinctly unpleasant impression upon them all.

Stella went back as bravely as she could to tell the story of her broken engagement, and Basil, as soon as he was strong enough, went over to Ireland to find out what he could about the Devorans, and they were all in such a state of tension that life seemed scarcely worth living.

The clouds of war were hanging heavily over everything. Not only were those who had dear ones at the front, or dear ones going there, in a state of barely suppressed anxiety and anguish, but every one left at home was suffering some privation more or less. Trade was bad. People could neither afford nor had the heart to

entertain, and this threw artists of every kind and degree out of work, and so into poverty.

Among the hundreds and thousands who suffered was Mrs. Clifford. Her funds were exhausted, she could get no new engagements, and her husband was ill, and sadly in need of the filthy lucre which he had squandered so recklessly. Until she was at the last gasp she felt that she would not apply to Stella for aid, dearly as she loved the girl, and dearly as she knew Stella would like to help her.

CHAPTER XXIII.

LORD ST. ERROL'S GIFT.

WHEN Stella arrived at the cottage, not quite unexpectedly, for she had wired to say she was coming home," she was met by the painful news that her old friend was very dangerously ill with the worst type of influenza. It was of such an infectious kind that the doctor would not allow Stella to see her, and had taken it upon himself to telegraph to her guardian, whose London address he had to come and take her away at once.

"But I can't go with Lord St. Errol," Stella began ; "he is quite young and unmarried."

"My dear young lady, you cannot stay here—you *shall* not stay here. You must have many friends to whom you can go. In fact, Mrs. Ogilvie told me, when your wire came this morning, that she had hoped you were going to be the guest of your *fiancé's* uncle and aunt for some time."

"I have no *fiancé*," Stella said firmly ; "my engagement is broken off."

The doctor almost jumped from his chair as he heard these words.

"Bless my soul, this is very sad and sudden ! Pray pardon me for speaking on the subject."

"There is nothing to pardon. Mrs. Ogilvie's was a

natural remark, and you were right to repeat it. It is sudden—very sudden. I only knew it myself last night.”

“It will shock Mrs. Ogilvie terribly to hear it. She was telling me her hopes for your happiness, and she described Captain Bentick as such a splendid fellow in every way.”

“So he is,” Stella said, with decision. “He is absolutely blameless in the matter. Circumstances have been too strong for him, and have rendered his marrying me impossible. That is why I have come home to Mrs. Ogilvie, and why it is impossible for me to go back to the Benticks.”

“It will be a terrible, a dangerous shock to Mrs. Ogilvie,” the doctor said thoughtfully.

“Then don’t give it to her,” Stella said promptly. “I have thought of a scheme by which she can be kept in the dark about my luckless fate until she is strong enough to bear it. I will go away with my guardian, and go up to a friend of mine in London—Mrs. Clifford. I wonder I didn’t think of her at once. She will take me, I know, until Mrs. Ogilvie is well enough to have me back. The difficulty is disposed of, you see. And if you will only let me see her I shall be *almost* happy. I am not a bit afraid of influenza. I am very strong and healthy.”

“I positively forbid your doing so—at any rate, until Lord St. Errol arrives. He may be here any moment now. Jem has gone over in the pony-trap to the station to meet him.”

“I’ll go and speak to the servants,” Stella said.

“They are both laid up. There are two nurses in the house—one to look after Mrs. Ogilvie, and the

other has the servants in charge. The whole atmosphere is charged with influenza germs. I shall have you on my hands next if Lord Errol doesn't take you away very soon."

"The whole atmosphere of London is charged with influenza germs. I shall be just as likely to catch it there as here."

"Couldn't your friend, Mrs. Clifford, go with you into the country to Errol Castle or Rose-in-Vale?"

"She has a husband who mightn't like it. He left her for a good many years, but he can't bear her to leave him for a minute if he has no other amusement."

"Possibly he might be able to accompany you. In that case, you could stay with your guardian at either of his places."

"I couldn't go to Errol Castle," Stella said, with a little sorrowful shake of the head.

"It would be the healthiest place in the world for you. It's in the Peak District, isn't it?"

"It is quite near to the Bentick's place; I could not go there," she was answering, when Jem drove up to the door, and the next moment St. Errol was in the room.

"Why, my dear girl, how's this? How could you leave Bentick so soon?"

"I'll tell you all about it presently."

"The sooner you take Miss St. Errol away, the better. The illness is a very infectious one, and if you start at once you will catch the next up-train," the doctor said, so anxiously that St. Errol did as he was desired, and took Stella away at once.

"Now tell me about it," St. Errol said, as soon as they had settled down comfortably in a railway-car-

riage. "How is Bentick, and why have you behaved so badly to him as to run away from him so soon?"

"I hardly know how to begin," she said, with a little gulp. "First promise me that you won't be very angry when I tell you."

"My dear child"—he took her hand very kindly—"don't be afraid; I can never be angry with you."

"And you mustn't be angry with him." He started, and looked at her questioningly. "Yes, it's that," she said mournfully—"he has seen some one he likes better, and our engagement has come to an end."

St. Errol's face turned black-red with anger.

"He has dared to do this? He has dared to treat *you* so?"

"You promised you would not be angry," she pleaded.

"'Anger' is not a hard enough word to express my feeling towards him."

"Wait until you have heard all about it, and then you will see that he could hardly help himself."

"Nothing can extenuate his conduct."

Then she told him the whole story as far as she knew it, and after she had told it, in gentle, broken accents, his wrath was more furiously kindled against Captain Bentick than ever. But, in deference to Stella's broken-heartedly expressed desire, he abstained from blaming Captain Bentick as wrathfully as he would otherwise have done.

Presently she told him of her wish to go to Mrs. Clifford for a time, and he acquiesced heartily in the plan.

"I will take you straight to her," he said, and his

heart beat quickly at the thought of again seeing the woman to whom that heart had been so constant.

"I know she will have me, because she's as fond of me as I am of her, and I don't think Mr. Clifford will object. If he does, what *shall* I do?" she said pitiously, as they were driving along to the Cliffords' lodgings; and then his generous, kindly nature, his constant consideration for others before himself, made him make the same proposition as the doctor had made.

"I can square Mr. Clifford, if he offers the least objection; but I don't think he will. It would be a good plan, I think, as you tell me Mrs. Clifford is not overdone with engagements just now, if you went down to Rose-in-Vale. She would be your chaperon, of course, but you would be the young 'lady of the land,' and you love the place, don't you?"

"Love it! I should think I did!"

"Well, dear Stella, it's your own now. I have just made you a little gift of it."

"St. Errol!"

"Let me have a look in your face, and see if you're pleased. Yes, I see you are; but I won't have pleasure and tears mixed."

"You meant it as a wedding-gift to Basil and me, and now that I am not going to be married as you *hoped*, I can't take it."

"I meant it as a gift to you. I made you the present of it before I thought you were going to marry—before we even knew Captain Bentick. Please God, we'll have many a happy day there yet, Stella! Holloa! here we are!"

The cab stopped before Stella could make any re-

joinder to words that had touched her to her heart's core. From the first day of his having had the responsibility of her thrown upon him he had grown thoughtfully considerate, this young man who had before that been irresponsible and happy-go-lucky as the majority of young men who are cast upon their own devices are apt to be. But in the first days of his unexpected promotion and elation he had thought of her—a stranger to him—and made things secure and safe for her.

But though she could make no rejoinder in words, she gave his hand such a grip, as he helped her out of the cab, as gave him full assurance of her gratitude and sisterly love.

The Cliffords' lodgings were in Regent Street, in order that for her sake professionally they might be in a good central position. They were rather expensive, and not absolutely uncomfortable. The master of the house acted as hall-porter, and his wife cooked superbly, it may be said, when it is taken into consideration that she had to cook for three sets of people, each one of whom had a distinctly different and critical taste.

As a rule, if Mr. Clifford had the best of every delicacy in season daintily cooked and served, he was content. But just now some bird of ill-omen had whispered "Have your food peptonized" in his ear. So peptonized it was, and when, after much preparation on the part of the cook, and much ill-concealed nausea on his side, he gave it up, a twin-bird whispered, "Benger's Food," which is a delicious mixture in itself, but involves some forethought and labor in its preparation. Mr. Clifford roundly asserted that he liked it better than anything he had ever tasted. But he never liked to taste it when it was ready, a peculiarity which

made "Benger" a nightmare to those who had to negotiate between it and Mr. Clifford.

He had "looked at" a couple of quails at dinner, and dismissed them from his presence as if they were as obnoxious to his olfactory organs and sight as though they had been carrion crows or vultures. He had turned with disgust from the lightest of custards, he had declared a well-prepared cup of Bovril to be nothing better than boiled-down horse's hoof, and now at nine o'clock he was hungry and wanted some mince made. The landlady was obliging, and went out to get the meat wherewith to make it, and Mrs. Clifford was busy arranging the little paraphernalia of saucepan and hot-water dish and plate, when the visitors, who were furthest from her thoughts at the moment, sent up their names and asked to be admitted.

A gleam, half of pleasure, half of carefully-cultivated jealousy, shot across Mr. Clifford's face as Lord St. Errol's name was announced, but, as he reminded himself, though the brief encounter he had once had with St. Errol was an evil one, "out of evil might come good." Accordingly, he received both visitors with civility, and Miss St. Errol with the appearance of real pleasure.

Without much preface St. Errol introduced the subject that was the cause of their unceremonious visit, namely, Mrs. Ogilvie's serious illness, and her inability to receive Stella into her house or to take charge of her. He left Stella to tell her own story to Mrs. Clifford, knowing quite well that the girl would conceal nothing, and that she would receive the sympathy which is so sweet to the sore-hearted.

When Mrs. Clifford took Stella into another room,

Lord St. Errol proceeded to business with the man to whom he felt instinctively money was a dire necessity.

"Mrs. Clifford and you will be conferring a real boon on my ward and myself if you can let her make her home with you for a time," he began, and Mr. Clifford interrupted him to say grimly :

"This is not much of a house for a fastidiously-brought-up young lady !"

Then the Rose-in-Vale scheme was propounded, and Mr. Clifford deigned to find it a good one.

"I propose," Lord St. Errol went on, "to offer anyone who is good enough to take charge of my ward remuneration at the rate of five hundred a year."

Mr. Clifford was secretly delighted, but took care not to express what he felt.

"And free quarters at Rose-in-Vale ?" he inquired.

"Certainly ; and I am sure Miss St. Errol will do all in her power to make your time pass pleasantly."

"I am sure of that ; at the same time, it's a bit of a sacrifice for a man like myself to leave London and its clubs. However, as you seem to be rather in a cleft stick about the young lady just at present, and she and my wife are very fond of each other, I shall certainly raise no objection."

He felt quite magnanimous as he said this, and determined that they should appreciate the sacrifice he was making for them, and reward him for it.

The end of it was that everything was arranged to every one's satisfaction. Stella remained with the Cliffords that night, and the next day they all went down to Rose-in-Vale, which bit of fairyland "reminded Mr. Clifford of a place his father had once in Ireland, which

with other relics of the departed Cliffords' greatness, had been brought to the hammer."

The two girls—Mrs. Clifford was only nine years older than Stella, and her heart was even younger than her years, in spite of all she had suffered—were very happy in a way, at Rose-in-Vale. The place was so beautiful in itself, that if natural beauties could set a sore and aching heart at rest, it would have worked the cure. But though she loved the place better than ever now that it was her very own, she could not forget that a man had thoughtlessly and heartlessly put upon her the very greatest slight that man can offer to woman. He had openly sought and won her, and now he had openly preferred another woman to herself and left her! At times she could make great and generous allowances for him; indeed, she nearly invariably did this. He had been placed in a cruel predicament by the dying words of Colonel Devoran, and the girl, like a spoilt child, had looked upon him as a new toy given to her for her comfort.

"I hope she is as clever as he told his aunt she is; if not, her temper will get loose and try him awfully. I won't think about them any more," she would resolve, and then she would think about them, of what they were to each other, and of how utterly apart she was from them, until not even lovely Rose-in-Vale seemed good in her eyes.

Mrs. Bentick wrote to her often—wrote letters of such motherly affection and kindness as made poor Stella feel still more deeply how much she had been wronged in having been separated from such a friend. In these letters Mrs. Bentick made very rare mention of her nephew, and none at all of her guest, Miss Dev-

oran, so Stella was left to conjecture what she pleased about these two.

They had been at Rose-in-Vale about a fortnight before Lord St. Errol ventured to volunteer a visit. He was afraid that both his absence and his presence might be misconstrued by Mr. Clifford, but finally he decided that it was his duty to go and see his ward.

He had in the meantime written to Captain Bentick. It was a calm and dispassionate letter, and it made the recipient wish that he had never been born rather than to have received such a letter from a man whom he liked and respected. He brooded over that letter, and pictured the contempt in which he was held by the writer and his friends. His trouble and remorse retarded his recovery, and he had a serious relapse. This tried Kathleen sadly, not so much on his account as her own. The sight of wounds—indeed, of any kind of suffering—was repugnant to her.

“Will he always be like this?” she asked his aunt, in the high-tempered way she had when annoyed.

“That is as God pleases. All we can do is to pray for him and nurse him, and be tender to him,” Mrs. Bentick said solemnly; and then Kathleen cried passionately, and said she “knew all that, and it was very hard on her that no one understood her or cared for her in this cold, heartless England.”

She was a little bit difficult to deal with. If she was not urgently pressed to visit her sick lover she was jealous and offended, and if she was urgently pressed to do so it brought on such an acute attack of sensitiveness at the sight of suffering that they sometimes feared that either her physical strength or her brain would give way.

All this was very trying to the loving old couple on whom she had been foisted, and they were constantly wishing that they had their dear Stella back with them as their adopted daughter and future niece.

It had been found, on examination of Colonel Devoran's papers, that his daughter was left comfortably off, but not rich, and that a certain Mr. Tooney, a Dublin lawyer, was deputed to look after her money. He wrote kind, frank-hearted letters, regretting that his business would not allow him to run over as an old friend of her father's to see her, and adding that if she would like to have a peep at "Dublin's fair city," where she was born, Mrs. Tooney, sundry young Tooneys, and himself would give her a real Irish welcome.

The idea appealed to her strongly. It was put before her so unexpectedly. She had not been in Ireland since she was a tiny child. Besides, Dublin was her birthplace, and one ought to see one's birthplace if possible. Tooney was such a funny name, too, and she knew they must be funny people, and she liked funny people! But she wouldn't leave darling Basil for the world if he wanted her.

"Darling Basil" was beginning to have a vague and unhappy impression that he might possibly get on without her for three or four weeks. An old and well-tried and tested maid of Mrs. Bentick's was told off to be the attendant and humble protector of the young lady, who could hardly conceal her impatience to tread her native soil.

"I shall write to you every day, and send you four-leaved shamrocks, and they will make you well, and strong, and everything else that you wish to be, and then we shall be so happy—shan't we, Basil?"

He had not much faith in the efficacy of the four-leaved shamrock, and not much more in her promise to write every day. But he tried to feel some enthusiasm about both, and reflected bitterly that *nothing* would have drawn Stella from his side while he was suffering, much less while he was in any sort of danger.

When the day came for Kathleen to start, she was beside herself with excitement. She felt parting with Basil, whose weakness made all excitement undesirable, and made such uncalled-for protestations of eternal affection and fidelity that his faintly-uttered replies sounded poor indeed in comparison.

At last his aunt ventured to suggest to Kate :

“As you have determined to go, my dear, don’t you think that the sooner you get the parting with Basil over, the better? He is really not strong enough to stand such a continued strain.”

“Now you’re unkind, Mrs. Bentick. Because I feel it is my duty to go to Ireland and see my man of business, and my birthplace, and all that, you think I don’t love my darling Basil.”

Mrs. Bentick did not say so, but she thought that Miss Devoran loved her darling self rather better.

“You see,” Kathleen went on explaining, “if I were useful in the way of being able to nurse my dear old boy I wouldn’t go away for an hour. But as I am a hindrance here, for I take up time that ought to be devoted to him, and I can’t bear the thought of his being neglected for me, I had better go. Every minute I’m away I shall be longing to be back. Oh, you don’t know what Basil is to me!”

“The trophy of your bow and spear,” Mrs. Bentick thought, but again she kept silence.

Kathleen's attendant found that young lady very tearful and depressed at intervals until they left Holyhead. Then she cleared up, and by the time they reached Kingston she was quite cheerful and full of amusing conjectures as to what the Tooney family would be like. The lawyer, in his note of invitation, had spoken of "young people." Kate hoped "they wouldn't *all* be girls." That, she felt, would be dull.

The excitement and bustle of landing amused her, and made her look radiantly pretty, and presently she heard her name, and saw the captain coming towards her, accompanied by a pleasant-looking elderly man, who announced himself as Mr. Tooney. In a minute or two they were rolling along in his neat little one-horse brougham to his house in a good square. Kathleen looked in vain for the squalor and untidiness which she had heard and read so much about.

She was received in a handsome house, and welcomed by a distinctly agreeable-looking family group, consisting of Mrs. Tooney and two grown-up daughters. The former was a fine-looking matron, the latter two good-looking girls, who spoke quite as pure English as she did herself, and whose dresses were of quite as recent a cut. Altogether her previous ideas were upset, and she was discontented. The Tooneys were not going to be at all amusing in the way she had anticipated.

"Now you see the whole family, Miss Devoran," her host said when they were seated at dinner. "I hope you'll find they'll look after you well."

"Papa, you forget Larry," broke from one girl; and the other put in, "The best of the family's to be seen yet, Miss Devoran."

"Who is that?"

“Larry—my brother Lawrence. He doesn’t live at home, but he’s not far from us, and we see him nearly every day.”

Kathleen murmured something polite, and forgot all about a man with the name of Larry Tooney the next moment.

She went up to her room early, and spent an hour in writing to her wounded betrothed before going to bed. She felt that she was doing rather a noble thing, for the voyage had been rough, and she was shaky and sleepy. She described the Tooney family, and said she was disappointed at finding they were not a bit “wilder” than any other people whom she had met. She also said that her “thoughts were with him constantly, and that if he ever seemed to like another girl she should break her heart. The next day she was to be taken out on a jaunting-car, and she should tell him *every* incident of the drive.”

Sleep overcame her when she had gone as far as this, and she could only add that she was “his very own Kathleen.”

The next was a fine, clear mid-winter day, and Kathleen almost regretted being bound to go for the drive in the jaunting-car, the shopping in Grafton Street was so intensely exhilarating. But the Miss Tooneys would have no backing out of the plan they had made for her amusement. “Larry was going to drive them in his own car,” they said, “and when they made an appointment with Larry they never broke it; he wouldn’t be pleased if they did.”

Kathleen began to regard the unknown Larry as a disagreeable, overrated, tyrannical young man—an only son with an idiotically adoring mother and sisters.

She felt that he would merely be a restraint on the intercourse that was becoming quite friendly between herself and his sisters, and wished that the Tooneys would let her enjoy herself in her own way, namely, in the fine shops full of lovely things.

CHAPTER XXIV.

STRAINED RELATIONS.

THERE are many more delightful sensations which the human frame can experience than those of being driven in an outside car over unequal ground at a rapid rate for the first time.

If you are quite young and extremely pliable and elastic, these sensations are, doubtless, exhilarating and thrilling. But if you are no longer quite young or extremely elastic, there are moments after you have deposited yourself upon one when you regret that you ever heard of the Green Isle, its jaunting-cars, and those unprofessed (but genuine) wits, the drivers.

Kathleen was very little behind his sisters in paying the homage of punctuality to Mr. Larry Tooney. He had not been a quarter of an hour in the house before she came down dressed for the drive, a little black figure with nothing brilliant or vivid about it with the exception of the sparkling Spanish face and liquid Irish eyes. Her heart was not in the contemplated drive. It was wandering still through the lovely shops in Grafton Street, wherein the exquisite beauty and artistic grace of Irish material had been brought home to her for the first time that morning.

“My son Lawrence, Miss Devoran,” Mrs. Tooney said quietly, as Kathleen came into the room; and

Kathleen looked up to see a tall, supple-figured man, with a careless manner and bored face, bowing to her.

There was a good deal of graceful, negligent ease both in style and figure about Larry Tooney. The liquid Dublin accent was hardly to be detected, but it was there in his soft voice. Distinctly he was a distinguished-looking man. Hitherto Kathleen had refused to see anything distinguished in any man who did not look "soldierly." There was nothing soldierly about Larry Tooney's appearance; nevertheless, he was a man to be singled out in a crowd and favorably remarked upon.

It was his "form" to appear quite indifferent to, and almost oblivious of, every woman he met on his first introduction to her; then to appear irresistibly attracted—this if she were attractive; and finally to seem to utterly succumb against his will.

These tactics had caused many a woman's heart to ache bitterly, and many a girl to feel she was the special one he had left behind him. But no one seemed to think that he was to blame at all. His father and mother always fancied that it was the other side in the wrong; and his sisters laughed, and said, "Oh, Larry is a lad."

He deferred to his sisters about everything. Where they should drive, where they should pull up for tea, and to what entertainment they should take Miss Devoran in the evening. He was evidently the kindest and most considerate brother that the imagination of a sister could desire. But as an acquaintance "he's insufferable," Kathleen thought indignantly, as he stepped aside to light his cigarette, and allow his father to hand her up on to the car.

As far as the scenery went, the drive was a delightful one. The Tooney girls knew the ropes well, and Larry took every hint they gave him as to where to slow down, and where to pull up, and where, finally, in an outskirt of Dublin, to halt and have tea.

By the time they reached this spot Kathleen Devoran was seething in an undisciplined temper. She had been left to hang on as best she could to the car, which did not jolt—it was hung on to far too good springs to misconduct itself in that way—but which swept round corners in a way that would have left unwary ones behind. Mr. Larry had been so absorbed in his driving and his sisters that he had not found time to address a single remark to her. Indeed, it seemed as if he regarded this drive as one of duty, not of pleasure, and Kathleen resented this attitude, and longed to take some revenge.

The little inn where they stopped for tea was an ideal one. Everything in and about it glistened with cleanliness. The glasses at the bar sparkled at them as they entered, and the little sitting-room in which they had tea could have defied that time-honored test—"a cambric pocket-handkerchief"—to find a particle of dust. Kathleen's notions of Ireland and the Irish were getting very much upset and mixed. The Tooneys were not funny people in an absurd way, and this little roadside inn was exquisitely clean.

She was midway through a watercress sandwich when Larry turned from generalities and addressed her directly for the first time. That watercress sandwich will live in her memory forever.

"Do you think you will like Ireland, Miss Devoran?"

"Like it? Oh yes! I love it already; not that it matters, as I'm not going to live here, you know."

"I did not know."

His reply nettled her. To be ignored is never pleasant, but to be ignored by a man whom you have determined beforehand should be a mere rollicking, reckless, irresponsible kind of person is, to say the least of it, disheartening. Kathleen was disheartened to such an extent that she felt cruel.

She rose slowly, and moved, teacup in hand, towards him. He rose to meet her.

"Why won't you let me take you your tea?"

"I'll not have any more, thank you."

"Oh, Miss Devoran, have another cup; it's just getting strong and good. Do now."

"Larry, how lazy you're getting! Didn't you see Miss Devoran's cup was empty, and you sitting there the while?"

Both sisters spoke eagerly. They were used to Larry and Larry's ways, and they feared that this half-English girl might misunderstand and undervalue him.

Miss Devoran was back in her chair, beside herself with rage. She longed to say some biting words which would put this coolly insolent Irish gentleman into his proper place. But she could not utter them. After all, she had to remind herself, he had done nothing, absolutely *nothing*, but be indifferent to her. And what did his indifference matter to her? for she was engaged to marry Basil Bentick.

With the thought of Basil came back the thought of his wounds and ailments. She shuddered as she thought of them, and pictured herself as the wife of an invalid who would require a good deal of attention. In her

selfish little heart there reigned a supreme pang of pity for herself.

“Poor Basil!” she thought, “he will be so sorry for me when I can’t go out for golf and hockey. It will be too bad if he keeps me from going to balls. I’ve been to so few, and I love them so.”

“The car’s at the door,” said the eldest Miss Tooney; and at the word Kathleen got herself into her furs.

They were not sable—she meant to have them later on—but they were nice dark furry furs, and the cape was cut quite in the right direction. In fitted tight to the shoulder, and flowed out beyond.

As he handed her up on to the car, Mr. Larry Tooney broke his silence towards her. He gripped her hand firmly, and murmured:

“I’ve been looking for you all my life, and I won’t lose you now.”

The girl was astounded, offended, horrified, and—pleased. Poor little scrap of feminine humanity that she was, the very weakest part of her nature came to the fore at this man’s bidding. She did not know him. She did not love or even like him. But he dominated her, and she was cowed by an impulse towards him which she herself did not understand.

During the drive home he did not address her again. He devoted himself to his sisters and his horse. He drove beautifully. He and his horse might have been one, so truly did they go together. Mr. Larry Tooney had a “hand,” and no mistake, on a horse’s mouth, and not only did he drive well, but he looked well while driving. Kathleen hated herself for the weakness, but she could not help throwing furtive glances towards him, and admiring his back and profile, and

his kind, courteous, brotherly bearing to his sisters. After each one of these glances she reminded herself of Basil, and persuaded herself that she was loving him more and more. Then the words Mr. Larry Tooney had spoken would recur to her, and she would blush from brow to chin, and ask herself, "What had she done that he could have insulted her by speaking them?"

A drizzling rain was succeeded by a heavy down-pour, and by the time they reached home they were all damp and dispirited. Kathleen rushed up to her room at once, and did not come down until the dinner-gong sounded. Then she found that Mr. Larry had kindly consented to stay and dine at the well-pleaded request of all his family.

"It is so rarely that Larry can spare us an evening," his mother said to Kathleen. "We always look upon it as a gala-night when he does so."

"How fond you are of him!" Kathleen said laughingly.

She was beginning to feel that he was potent not only in his own family, but in her life, and she struggled against the feeling, for she remembered that she was engaged to be married to a gallant soldier who had risked his own life to save her father's. Not that she thought that a deed of extra account, for she was a soldier's daughter, and had been brought up in the belief that courage was not only the highest quality a man can possess, but also the only one really worth having. How often she had heard her father say of some man in his company: "He's a splendid fellow, full of pluck and loyalty, and thank God there are thousands like him!" As she recalled these words

she became conscious that Mr. Larry Tooney was addressing her.

"I found a little bit of luck for you to-day, Miss Devoran."

"Why, Larry," one of his sisters exclaimed, "it's a four-leaved shamrock! You *are* a lucky girl, Miss Devoran! Where did you find it, Larry?"

Larry smiled languidly. He did not care to explain that he had found it in a florist's shop.

"Thank you so much—so very, very much; but what shall I do with it?" Kathleen asked in perplexity, as she touched the green leaf with a light forefinger.

"What will you do with it! Why, put it in a locket, of course, and it will bring you good luck all your life," the eldest Miss Tooney explained, while the younger one added:

"I'm not so sure about the luck since Dan Coghlan gave me one when we got engaged, and papa broke it off the next day—you remember, papa?"

Papa remembered, and they all laughed as if a broken engagement were rather a good joke.

"What are we all going to do this evening?" Mr. Tooney asked, when the mirth excited by the mention of the ruptured betrothal had subsided.

"Shall we have a sing-song, mother?" Larry asked, and when she gladly acquiesced, as she invariably did in any proposal that kept him at home near her, he went on to tell Kathleen that she should have a real good dose of Irish melody.

"My mother sings everything Tom Moore ever wrote—don't you, mum dear? Not to the harp—don't be afraid—not to the harp. We have always barred the harp—haven't we, mother?"

Mrs. Tooney laughed.

“Larry speaks as if the harp had been wrested from me with violence, whereas I never was the proud possessor of one.”

“What’s a harp like?” Kathleen asked. “I’ve never seen one, but I have heard that it is quite as expensive to keep as a horse. How did the poor bards manage when they had to carry one about?”

“Tom Moore’s was quite a small one—a little golden beauty that stood upon a table when he twanged it,” Miss Tooney said; and then she nerved herself to add what she had been longing to say ever since the subject was opened: “Larry has written some lines about our Irish harp. Come into the drawing-room, and I’ll recite them.”

“And while she is committing murder I’ll go in with you and have a cigarette, father,” Larry said.

But his sister waited until the cigarette was smoked and Larry had rejoined them before she ventured upon that slippery and treacherous ground called recitation.

If there is one more thankless task than another to be performed in the field of entertaining, it is reciting. The very appearance of an audience expectant of a recitation is enough to weaken and demoralize the stoutest-hearted. To stand upon a platform and declaim in cold blood is bad enough, but when it comes to standing upon your own hearthrug and declaiming to a select circle of your family and friends—well, madness lies that way.

However, Miss Tooney went for her sisterly work of making the best of Larry’s verses with a courage that was quite commendable. She stood well out in the

middle of the room with a nicely-arranged light playing upon her, and while every one else looked more or less uneasy, she pulled herself together and gave them the benefit of Larry's muse.

"It's called 'Ireland's Harp,'" she said, by way of preface, and then she rushed at her lines and said them :

I.

"Dumb for a time, but the golden harp
Will awake when a bolder hand
Once again strikes the chord for the Emerald Isle
In the tones of our own fair land.
Once again shall the leaf be the theme of a song
As wild and as bold in its measure
As of old when Ireland's sweetest bard
Sang of Ireland's fairest treasure.

II.

"Dumb, but not dead. There's a life in that harp,
A life that can never grow cold ;
For to honor and valor, for love and for wit,
Alone wake those harp's strings bold.
They respond not to meanness ; the harp of the free
Sounds only when glorious the measure,
As was that when old Ireland's sweetest bard
Sang of Ireland's fairest treasure."

As Miss Tooney finished her performance the family looked inquiringly at Kathleen, and Kathleen regarded them with anxious embarrassment. She did not like to say they "were pretty verses," because she understood that it would be damning them with faint praise to use such an expression, and it was evident to her that none of Mr. Larry Tooney's family would like to hear him faintly praised. Nor did she like to betray her ignorance of the national life and literature by ask-

ing who Ireland's sweetest bard was. While she sat in a state of nervous embarrassment, Mr. Larry laughed at his sister for the dramatic effort she had made to vitalize his lines.

"You're a very good girl, Doreen," he said, with good-humored patronage; "but you should be content to look well and keep your mouth shut."

This speech roused Kathleen's generosity and let loose her tongue.

"How can you say that when your sister only did it to amuse me!" she began indignantly; but her indignation could not live in the atmosphere of the calm, languid superiority he assumed, and she became a shy, nervous girl, not a fiery little partisan, at once when he said:

"I can assure you the verses were not intended to be comic, Miss Devoran. Doreen has quite failed to convey their meaning to you if they amused instead of touching you."

Kathleen's face smarted with mortification; the sting brought the tears into her eyes, but she would not let them fall. While she struggled with the mixed feeling, Mr. Larry turned away and talked to his mother.

The day had been so fully occupied that Kathleen had not found time to write a line to Basil, and when she went up to bed she was too tired to do so.

"I'll get up early to-morrow and write then instead," she resolved; but in the morning, when she woke, she was met by a message from Miss Tooney to the effect that they were going to drive to a meet about fifteen miles distant, and must be ready to start within the hour.

Again Mr. Larry did them the honor to drive, and

this day he did not ignore Kathleen, but made her the chief object of his attentions both during the drive and when they had got to the meet. For there his sisters got off the car and walked about with the numerous men, who were only too glad to show a good deal of attention to old Tooney's daughters and Larry's sisters. For Mr. Tooney senior gave capital dinners, and Larry was City treasurer, and one way and another had a good deal of influence.

There was no doubt about it. Larry Tooney had the art of insidiously gaining the good graces and favor of women. Up to the present time he had done this and remained scatheless. In other words, he had retreated in good order without let or hindrance to himself.

But this was a state of things that could not possibly go on forever. Wary as he was, heartless as he had often been called by women whom he had deserted, and men who were disgusted with him for these desertions, he was not invulnerable. He had intended to amuse himself by wooing Kate in his own indolent fashion, to win her and then to step aside and let her lawful lover reclaim her if he could. But he soon found the tables turned upon him. Whether she was a consummate flirt, whether she was as artless as she seemed, whether she was merely a graceful humbug inclined to pay him back in his own coin or not, he could not determine. But whatever she was, she had managed to get a grip on him before they separated that day that he could not shake off.

It tightened these unwelcome bonds powerfully to have his father call him aside and speak to him seriously when he drove his sister and Miss Devoran home.

"See here, Larry, my boy," the elder Mr. Tooney said

as he followed his son into the smoking-room, "there must be no nonsense with Colonel Devoran's daughter. She's engaged to as fine a chap as there is in the army, and that's saying a good deal. And she's your mother's guest, and the long and the short of it is that I'll have no blathering philandering here. You must understand that, Larry. And if you could just take a holiday and run over to London for a week or so, don't you think it would be just as well?"

Larry laughed.

"You needn't send me into penal servitude this time, sir. I'm much harder hit than the girl."

"Harder hit! How often I've heard you use that phrase, Larry! It would kill your mother if you acted a dishonorable part towards a girl she has asked here, and vouched to take care of. You have a good head-piece on you. Be sensible, and go away for a time."

"I have a heart as well as a head. I'll go—after I have spoken to Miss Devoran."

"And what will you speak to her, Larry? You can't mean——"

"To ask her to be my wife—that's what I mean to do, sir. She shall have the option of taking me or leaving me."

"And she Devoran's daughter, and an engaged girl!"

"With no heart in her engagement. She was grateful and lonely; in her gratitude and loneliness she had pledged herself before she knew what she was doing."

"How do you come by this knowledge of her sentiments?"

"I love her."

"You have said that of other girls. Speak to your

mother about it. Take advice before it's too late. Your mother will be your best guide. If she asks you to give this up, you'll do it, my boy—I know you will."

"My mother will neither be cruel nor cowardly, so, as you ask me, sir, I will promise to be guided by her, and to accept her decision, whatever it may be."

He held his hand out as he spoke, and his father had the firm feeling that his son would act honorably at whatever cost to himself. At the same time, he felt bitterly angry with Kathleen Devoran. "She must have made the advances," he thought, and it was with much trouble that he schooled himself into meeting her with cold civility at dinner. Devoran's daughter to have brought such a trouble upon him! Devoran, who had been his school-chum, and for whom he had cherished a lifelong friendship! The relations at the Tooney dinner-table that night were very much strained. In fact, Kathleen Devoran was the only unembarrassed one at the table.

After his interview with his son, Mr. Tooney had said to his wife :

"You must speak to Larry about that girl. I have told him you will do so. You had better tell him——"

She held her hands up deprecatingly, and tried to speak cheerfully.

"If you tell me what to say, had you not better say it to him yourself? Ordered words are never pleasant, either to speak or to hear."

"He may listen to you."

"He will listen to me," she said proudly; and at this Mr. Tooney took refuge in the utterance of the hackneyed phrase :

"Do as you like, do as you like! And be sorry for

it when your son has made a mess of his life and got himself into a stew with the girl's friends."

"If I did as I liked, I should wait for Larry to open the subject to me," Mrs. Tooney said brightly.

"That's cowardice. It's your plain duty, as his mother, to stop him from making an ass of himself. That's my point of view."

"And my point of view is this : that, as his mother, it is my plain duty not to give him a minute's unnecessary pain."

"She's not the daughter-in-law I would have chosen."

"Your mother made the same remark about me when you married me. But I have not turned out a dead failure as a wife, have I?"

"Oh, do as you like, you're sure to do right ; and if you do say anything to Larry, make him understand that I have no unkind feeling about the matter. I'm only anxious for his happiness."

"I'll wait events," Mrs. Tooney thought as, she left the dining-room, and gave Larry's hand a passing clasp at the door. Then she made her way to her own little room, which was half dressing-room and half boudoir, and which was wholly her own—a room in which she could seclude herself when the family life and noise overcame her and worried her nerves, but at the same time a room in which her children had always been sure of a warm welcome from their babyhood up to the present time. She stirred the fire to a cheerful blaze, and presently there came, as she expected, a knock at the door.

"Come in, dear Larry," she said, and the door was opened, but it was not Larry who came in.

CHAPTER XXV.

“IT’S NOT TOO LATE.”

THE country was beside itself with wo for those who were killed and anxiety about those who were “wounded and missing.” The Government was playing a splendidly dignified and patriotic game—a proud, calm, a persevering game.

All mere private troubles and worries about everyday life and routine were effaced and ignored by this great national anxiety as to the issue of the war in South Africa. Men and women, and children, too, of the best and loyal type, thought of nothing, talked of nothing, were interested in nothing else. Young men by the thousands of every class were leaving their new-made brides, their first-born children, their old parents tottering towards their graves, in order to go out and fight for Queen, country, and the right.

It might have been due to the intolerable, impatient anxiety he was feeling to get sound again soon, and go back to the front, that Basil Bentick pondered very little on Kathleen’s long silences and short letters. She had taken his sympathies and the susceptible, protecting impulses, by which every true man is thrilled, by storm when she was cast upon his care. But her selfishness and spasmodic bursts of excitable temper had tried

him much. His thoughts reverted continually to Stella now—to her brave, generous, tender treatment of the situation in which his weakness, vacillation, call it what you will, had placed her and his uncle and aunt.

This being his state of mind, his spirits rose with a bound when he received a letter from Kathleen containing these few words :

"Forget me and forgive me. I am going to marry another man.

"KATHLEEN DEVORAN."

He read these words over three or four times, fearing it might be a nightmare or the beginning of madness. Then he sent for his aunt, asked her to put her hand on his forehead, and said, as he gave her the letter :

"Is that all right and clear, or am I wandering a bit ?"

"It's clear and decisive, dear Basil. She is straightforward."

"Thank you, aunt. Some people would have told me it served me right, and blamed the girl. I couldn't have stood that. As it is, I can say, God bless dear little Kathleen, and may the chap she's going to marry make her a good husband !"

"Amen to that prayer, Basil," Mrs. Bentick answered heartily ; and then she spoke of other things—of the war, and the property, of the horses and dogs in which he had always taken so keen an interest. But a delicate instinct made her avoid all mention of Stella St. Errol.

After this he grew better rapidly. He was no longer torn by conflicting sentiments of duty, honor, and love.

The feeling he retained for Kathleen Devoran was of the kindest, friendliest description—nothing more. She and circumstances had cast a glamour over him. That was dispelled now, and he saw her as she was—a dear little impressionable girl, who would probably in good hands develop into a splendid woman. But he felt that his were not the hands to mold her, and he rather wished to see “what the fellow was like” who had taken her from him.

* * * * *

St. Errol timed his visit to his ward at Rose-in-Vale most opportunely as it happened. The day he came there she had received a reply from Stanley in answer to her letter of congratulation on his marriage. In it he told her that not only his but Mrs. Stanley's health had broken down, and that they were going to embark the next day for England.

When she showed this letter to her guardian, he was enthusiastic at once on the subject of giving Stanley a right royal good welcome home. For the time he even forgot to torture himself by thinking of Mrs. Clifford.

“Stanley and his wife must take up their quarters for a good spell at Errol Castle,” he said to Stella, and then added : “If she turns out to be the brick Stanley's wife ought to be, I'll get him to be my agent. I'll build a jolly house for them in the park, give them Jock, and take out a roving commission for myself for two or three years.”

“And I'll get dear old Mr. Ledger to come and live near me ; and between us Mrs. Clifford and I will nurse him and take care of him.”

Stella spoke with rather a choked utterance. Her

heart seemed to have got loose and risen to her throat. The tears had rushed into her eyes, but she made an effort, and would not suffer them to pass the boundary of her lids.

"What a strange fascination you and he have for each other!" St. Errol said meditatively. "I think," he added quickly, "that you and he must be connected if not related."

The girl shook her head.

"Don't raise my hopes too high only to see them dashed to the ground," she said spiritedly; "to be connected with such a man would be happiness; to be related to him would be glory."

As she said this she drew herself up with a gesture that reminded him of Dalma. As the impression crossed his mind he thought: "Why don't I love this girl well enough to ask her to be my wife?"

The next moment another thought exorcised this foolish one. It was this: "She is my ward—a sacred trust left to me by the old man who loved her as well as if she had been his own child. Besides"—here St. Errol put his hand to his forehead uneasily—"she reminds me of the only woman I shall ever love. Stella 'suggests' Mrs. Clifford to me every time I see her. Come along, Jock! We'll give Stanley a ripping good welcome home, won't we?"

Jock was quite acquiescent. He jumped up in a frolicsome way for a time, then settled down on his hind-legs and offered his front-paws to his master with emotional velocity. If the tenderly-extended paw was not taken at once, Jock became abject, and then ran away to the lake, where he would try to retrieve swans, punts, ducks and geese, and any other small gear that

might be about. But this day the paw was taken and shaken so heartily that Jock left the lake and all that was upon it to their own devices and attached himself to Stella.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon when the London evening journals and letters arrived at Rose-in-Vale. Mr. Clifford had gone to a race meeting about twenty miles distant. He had gone in a buoyant mood in spite of having been a victim to the influenza fiend for several days. He had never been more considerate to his wife than he was on this morning. He had never given more consideration to the adjustment of his sporting-looking suit, the arrangement of his tie, and the polish on his boots.

"If you like, you can ask St. Errol to stay here to-night. The best thing he can do is to take a fancy to his pretty ward and marry her," he said to his wife as he put the finishing touches to his toilet.

"The very best thing for him, but not for her," Mrs. Clifford replied calmly, but her calmness was thrown away. He retorted :

"What do you imply? That he is in love with another woman—yourself, for instance?"

She looked at him. In spite of his brave attire, he looked so pitifully weak and frail that the words she had on her tongue died on her lips. Instead of them she said :

"What I meant was that dear Stella's heart is in the keeping of another man. Lord St. Errol, good, noble, honorable as he is, will never touch her heart in the way you mean, and she will never marry unless she loves."

"You mean that she is hankering after that fellow

Bentick still?" he asked with a laugh that goaded her into saying:

"I mean that I respect her delicacy and my own too much to discuss the matter with you."

He went over to her suddenly, and kissed her.

"Don't get on your high horse to-day; let us part friends. I feel the tide of my fortune has turned. I shall make a great coup to-day."

She brightened up responsively directly.

"I trust you will—I hope you will."

"You were going to put in a 'but.'"

She smiled.

"Yes, I was going to say 'But I hope when you have made your great success, when you are satisfied with yourself on the turf, that you will lead a peaceful life. This excitement is demoralizing.'"

"If you were not such an attractive woman I should be—well, rather inclined to tell you to mind your own business."

"Surely your business is mine. You must remember that we were fond of each other once."

He went over and kissed her again.

"Go and make me a tuberosé buttonhole, dear, and I'll keep it till I die."

She went and made it, and tied it with two or three of her own hairs.

"I've been an awful fool; I might have gained your love, whereas I've never got more than your liking," he said, as he was going out; and something impelled her to say: "It's not too late."

CHAPTER XXVI.

“ON, STANLEY, ON!”

THE Stanleys were back in England. St. Errol met them at Plymouth, and gave his old comrade all the news that he thought would be of interest as briefly as possible.

Among other items, the young guardian mentioned that his charming ward's engagement to Captain Bentick was broken off.

“Stella? That's the name of the lady who wrote to congratulate you when we were married, isn't it, dear?” Mrs. Stanley asked, with her most insinuating air of affectionate confidence in her young husband.

“It is,” Stanley answered curtly, and for a moment the mask fell from his face, and the repugnance he felt for her was visible.

“Really, I shouldn't have thought, from the style of her letter, that she was young enough to be any one's ward,” the lady went on, more tartly. “The letter gave me the impression that its writer was quite a woman of the world with plenty of experience. It's quite interesting to hear that she is young. Is she pretty?”

“I think her lovely,” St. Errol said warmly.

He felt antipathetic to Mrs. Stanley already as he pictured what “might have been” if she had not come

across and marred the plans he had made for Stella and Stanley.

“ And do you think her lovely too, dear ? ” Mrs. Stanley asked her husband ; and there was a degree of iciness in her level, suave tones that warned both men that there were breakers ahead.

“ I have never been in the habit of expressing myself as warmly as St. Errol does. Miss St. Errol is very good-looking, but as I'm not her guardian I am not privileged to think or say what he does about her. You're looking quite cold. Won't you have your fur cloak ? ”

He undid a case of wraps and other things as he spoke, and helped her into her cloak with polite attention. Then, as she said she “ was only tired and sleepy,” he proposed to St. Errol that they should move on into a smoking-carriage, which they did, leaving Mrs. Stanley to her own reflections, which were mainly about this unknown, young, and lovely Stella.

“ It was wrong, dreadfully wrong of me to marry him,” the poor woman thought mournfully, but without bitterness. “ He so young and good-looking, and I so much older and plain. Poor fellow ! poor fellow ! If I could undo the foolish act I would, for I saw it in his face when he heard her name that he loves her.”

She cried a little as these thoughts crossed her mind. Then she laughed hysterically at herself for being so foolish as to be jealous.

“ At my age ! It's too absurd ! ” she told herself. “ Poor fellow ! I ought to have offered to be a mother to him when he asked me to marry him. Ah, well ! ”

Conflicting emotions coming on the top of enteric fever and a long sea-voyage are very exhausting. By

the time they reached London Mrs. Stanley was seriously ill—so ill that she could not carry out the intention she had formed of going away to her own friends, and leaving her husband free to enjoy the society of his own class.

“ Poor fellow ! it’s the least I can do to relieve him of my presence. He must be ashamed of me. I saw Lord St. Errol’s expression when he saw me first. He looked shocked. Oh, why did I wrong a man I loved so much by marrying him ? ”

The preceding is a sample of the vain regrets that crossed her mind continually. But in spite of the anguish of remorse which she suffered for having “ broken his life,” as she termed it, she was outwardly a cheerful invalid. Her gratitude for the smallest attention from her husband was so touching that he felt as if he could not do enough to repay it. But through it all he knew with bitter consciousness that he never could give her the one thing needful. He could not feel a spark of love for her. She was right. She was too elderly and plain.

The description St. Errol gave of the ill-matched pair appealed so strongly to Stella’s sympathies that she proposed one day that she and Mrs. Clifford should go up to town and see if they could be of any service to the poor lady, who was lying ill at an hotel without any of her own people about her. But on the day she proposed it Mr. Clifford went out, as has been told, to some local races, at which he had a serious reverse of luck. The shock was so great that he had an attack of heart disease, and was taken home dead.

This tragic incident altered the plans of many members of the little coterie with which we are dealing.

Stella devoted herself entirely to Mrs. Clifford, whose nerves were a good deal shaken by the sudden death of the man who had been desperately trying to her while he lived. The Stanleys seemed to recede from Stella's thoughts and sympathies, and the memory of the old naval man who had impressed her came back vividly. So eventually, after a very short debate, it was settled that Mrs. Clifford and Stella should go down to Errol Castle with Mrs. Ogilvie, who was nearly well again, and “look after” Mr. Ledger till such time as his leg permitted him to move back with them to Rose-in-Vale.

“The first thing I shall do after we have seen to Mr. Ledger's welfare will be to go and call on the Benticks,” Stella said, as they were driving from the station to Errol Castle.

“And it will be the right thing to do, if you are sure there is no sentiment lurking behind the intention,” Mrs. Ogilvie answered.

Stella smiled.

“I mean to be as unromantically friendly with them *all*, as if I had never been engaged to Captain Bentick. Why shouldn't I be? We made a mistake, which he has rectified in time.”

“That's the right way to look at it—if you can,” said Mrs. Ogilvie.

“Stella can; I answer for her,” Mrs. Clifford put in. “She has determined to make the most and the best out of her life, and will never allow herself to repine about a lost love—will you, Stella?”

“I won't promise all that, but I shall not allow myself to repine about having lost Captain Bentick. You see,” she went on to explain, “Basil and I are very much alike in temperament. We are both very impulsive. One

would never have been able to act as ballast to the other."

"I think the young lady to whom he is engaged at present must be built on impulsive lines also," Mrs. Clifford said ; and Stella laughed in a heart-free way as she replied :

"Yes ; but she has a bad temper, so in order to handle her properly he will be compelled to put the curb on himself."

"We are all getting so philosophical and reasonable that it's a good thing that here we are at the door of the castle. Oh, Stella ! when I was dismissed in that summary, not to say crude, way I never thought to see you or it again."

There was more emotion than she wished to exhibit in Mrs. Clifford's voice as she said this. So Stella wisely turned her head away as she said :

"And now, dear, you have come back to be warmly welcomed by every one, from the lord of the castle down to little poor unknown me."

It was very rough weather in the Peak district when they arrived at Errol Castle. Kinder Scout looked like an Alpine peak ; and the majority of the roads were impassable. Under these circumstances, until the sledge arrived which Lord St. Errol wired to say he should send them from town, Stella and her guests were shut up in the castle to a certain extent, though at times they did get through the snow to the outlying hot-houses and greenhouses.

Stella was a good guide to almost every nook and corner of the castle, and the confidential housekeeper of the late lord soon began to have qualms as to the integrity of the two secret rooms being preserved. Accord-

ingly she wrote to her master, giving him a hint of her anxieties. In the letter she said :

“Miss St. Errol is here, there, and everywhere, pointing out things to the other young lady. There is hardly a book in the library that they don't take down, or at least touch. If they are snow-bound much longer, they may come upon the spring that opens the door, as your lordship knows. If they do, I hope your lordship will be here at the time.”

“There can be no possible harm in my going down, as Mrs. Ogilvie is with them,” St. Errol thought ; so he went to Stanley to talk the matter over with him, as was only natural, they were such true comrades.

“You ought to go—certainly you ought to go,” Stanley said, when St. Errol had put the position of affairs before him. “I understand and appreciate the delicacy of feeling which makes you hesitate about going where Mrs. Clifford is just yet ; but the meeting and the inevitable outcome of that meeting must come about sooner or later.”

St. Errol flushed.

“I shall not let her see that she is more to me than any other woman who may be a guest in my house,” he said.

“My dear fellow, you have already let her see that she is more to you than any other woman in the world. Don't overdo the thing. Reserve and the fear of climbing lest I might get a fall have lost me the only woman I ever have loved or ever shall love. I owe much to the poor patient woman I have married, and I try to pay the debt. But I am a man with a man's feelings,

and—well, I've made my life a blank. Don't you go and do likewise."

"How is Mrs. Stanley to-day?" St. Errol asked, after an awkward pause.

"As ill as she can be and live," Stanley said sadly. "That's where the wretchedness of it all comes in. She hasn't been happy since I married her, and I don't feel more miserable now than I've felt all along. What a rum thing life is!"

"It is," St. Errol assented. Then he went on: "We were both very happy in the old poverty-stricken days, were we not?"

"Yes, they were very good times to look back upon, but we didn't think them so then."

"It's all in a lifetime," St. Errol said resignedly. He could not forget that he should see Mrs. Clifford the next day, and look upon her with loving eyes without sin.

The two men dined together that night. Stanley was dismally depressed. Still his appetite was as good as ever. As Owen Meredith has remarked: "He may live without women, or music, or books; but civilized man cannot live without cooks!"

In the course of conversation after dinner, when they were getting on well with the walnuts and the wine, Stanley mooted a matter that had been weighing on his mind for some hours.

"When you left me this morning I went up and told my wife that you had been to inquire for her. She was awfully pleased, and then—what do you think she asked?"

"Can't imagine."

"That Miss St. Errol will come and see her."

“By Jove ! but I’m sure Stella will come.”

“You think she will ?”

“I am sure of it. She proposed calling on Mrs. Stanley the day poor Clifford died, but she had to postpone her visit in order that she might look after Mrs. Clifford.”

“She mustn’t postpone it much longer if she is to see my wife alive,” Stanley said gravely.

* * * * *

When some one burst into the room in which Mrs. Tooney sat waiting for her son, that lady knew that the “worst” in the estimation of her husband and herself had happened. For the some one was Kathleen Devoran, and they had far more magnificent views for their son matrimonially than would be met by this moderately-endowed daughter of the late Colonel Devoran.

The girl flung herself impetuously into Mrs. Tooney’s arms, or, rather, upon that handsome matron’s broad breast, for the arms were not opened to receive her.

“Don’t be annoyed with Larry, and do be kind to me !” Kathleen sobbed out ; “he has asked me marry him, and I have said I will.”

At this juncture Mrs. Tooney was a very angry mother, but she was at the same time a very kind-hearted woman. She took the poor trembling little girl close to her heart, and told her not to “sorrow about it.”

“I’ll speak to my son, and let him know that he has done the wrong thing in speaking of love and marriage to an engaged girl. Lift your head up now, dear, and I’ll promise you I will settle everything for you. You shall go back and be married to Captain Bentick just

as pleasantly as if none of this foolishness had happened."

"But I don't want to marry Captain Bentick; it's Larry that I love," Kathleen sobbed out; and then Mrs. Tooney had to perform the hardest of all tasks which a mother is called upon to execute—namely, to throw cold water on her son's love's young dream.

"And it's Larry who will never be able to marry you," Mrs. Tooney said firmly. "He is as good a son as ever lived, and I would give him the wish of his heart, if I could, at any hour of the day—if I could. But I can't give him his wish now if it's you. He can't marry on his income: he has no money from private resources, so he will have to marry some one with more money than you have, my poor child! Go back to England and marry your lawful lover."

Kathleen almost groaned.

"I have already written to tell my 'lawful lover' that I am going to marry another man," she wept out hopelessly, and in her heart of hearts she did not know for the loss of which man she grieved most.

Basil had been gradually absorbed into her affections. Larry had taken her heart by storm. And now Larry's mother was giving her clearly to understand that she would not be warmly welcomed into the Tooney family, even though she gave up the Bentick family for them.

There were several bad quarters of hours in the Tooney household the next day. Mr. Tooney and his son had a dangerously dignified interview, at the end of which the father in the elder man went out to meet and conciliate the son.

"You're a grown-up man, Larry—City Treasurer, and independent of me altogether; I know that, and I

have no authority but that of love over you. But think of your mother and sisters. I won't be here very long, and when I'm gone who's to look after them but you? If you're burdened with a poor helpless, vain woman like Kathleen Devoran, all your time will be taken up in looking after her, and she'll give you the slip before you know what she's about. Let her go back to her English friends and her own lover, and you take the great heiress who's just waiting for you, and make the name of Tooney honored in the land."

"This great heiress wants a title, sir," Larry answered, with that dulcet laugh which had done such deadly damage to the many ladies with whom his looks and his laugh had played havoc.

"And it's the title you'll have if you make a dash for it, Larry. See what you are at your age, and see what I was when my years were no more than yours are now! You've everything before you, and you've nothing behind you, as far as I know."

Larry nodded his head in respectful assent.

"Your mother has spoken to Miss Devoran; it was a most unpleasant thing for me to do on account of poor old Devoran and all that, you know, that I told your mother she had far better do it for me. It's a grand thing to have a good wife, especially when it comes to having a crux of any kind with the children. Women understand these things better than we do. Think of that, Larry! Think of what pride your mother would feel if you went to her and told her you were going to give her a daughter-in-law with money enough to make you the first man in Ireland."

"My mother would rather see me happy," Larry said with a merry laugh.

CHAPTER XXVII.

DIFFICULT TASKS.

It goes without saying that as soon as Stella heard that Mrs. Stanley wished to see her she desired to go.

“But before I start I must go and see Mr. Ledger. If he hears that I have been here and gone away without seeing him, he will be hurt. I know you’ll come with me, won’t you?” she said to Mrs. Clifford.

“Of course I will. The interest you take in him has infected me. Besides, I have just remembered that my father had relations on his mother’s side called Ledger.”

“What was your father’s name?” Stella asked.

“Bircham—John Ledger Bircham was his name.”

“Now we will be off to see *my* Mr. Ledger. How funny it will be if it turns out that he is in any way related to you!” Stella said lightly; and they started for The Hulk on their mission of merciful inquiry.

The old naval man had been shifted from his bed to a spacious couch which stood in a window-nook, and commanded a view of the garden, also of the boy who cultivated that garden when his master’s eye was upon him.

On this particular day the boy’s conduct had been peculiarly reprehensible. He was supposed to be plant-

ing celery in a deep trench, but as he found it far easier to dig a shallow one he planted it in the latter. Mr. Ledger's celery had always been renowned for its size, whiteness, and solidity. This year he foresaw that his pride in it and profit out of it would have a downfall.

He tapped at the window loudly, but the boy was at such a distance that he safely assumed he need not reply to the taps, as he guessed master was in a tantrum.

Failing to beguile the boy to within stormy-language reach, Mr. Ledger rang for his housekeeper, and while he was interviewing her there came a knock at the front-door, and the interview came to an abrupt termination, as the housekeeper had to hurry down to admit the young lady from the castle.

"I've brought my friend Mrs. Clifford with me," Stella said, as she rushed into the room. "I have to go up to town for a day or two, and she will look after you while I'm away." Then she went on to say how and under what circumstances she had met and grown to love Mrs. Clifford. "We have lockets alike, too; isn't that funny? In hers there's the miniature of a lovely woman. She flatters me by saying I'm something like it. Here is mine."

She unclasped the locket, opened and handed it to him, and for the first time in his life the old sailor lost control over his emotions. Breaking into a violent fit of sobbing, he could not articulate plainly for some minutes. When he did speak, it was to say:

"Bring her to me—bring her—you are both—my daughters."

Clouds hung over the Tooney household. Kathleen Devoran knew that she was not a welcome guest, and this knowledge did not tend to cool her always hot temper. She could not go back to the Benticks after the way she had behaved, even if they had expressed a wish to see her back, which they did not. She could not tell Larry that he ought to marry her at once, because she was not happy as a visitor in his father's house any longer. Larry's father was polite to her, but abstracted. His mother was kind, but sorrowful. His sisters seemed to think the whole affair a joke, and tried to amuse her with stories of the many women and girls with whom Larry had "carried on." As for Larry himself, he was, of course, just as dear and delightful to her as ever. But he did not realize how miserable she was in the bosom of his family circle. Before she had been engaged to Larry three days she repented of having written that note of farewell to Basil Bentick.

"I must give a party in honor of my bride-elect," Larry told his mother one day.

"Ah, Larry! How can you?"

"Very well indeed. I'm very proud of her, and you and the girls must do your best to let people see that you're proud of her too."

Mrs. Tooney looked sad.

"Now, mother, none of that. She's well born, she's well bred, she's very pretty. I'm a lucky man to have won her."

"It's she is the lucky girl to have won you."

"Then we are both favorites of fortune. Doreen must get up a play, and I will look after the concert part of the affair. I shall ask Mrs. Clifford to help me."

“Who is Mrs. Clifford?”

“In professional life she is Dalma. She has sung in Dublin—you must have heard her.—In private life she is Mrs. Clifford, and one of the most charming women in the world. What’s the matter?”

“Why, this, Larry : Kathleen Devoran has spoken to me about Stella St. Errol, who was engaged to Benticke before—before he unfortunately became entangled with Kathleen. Miss St. Errol and Dalma are great friends.”

“She’s a great beauty, she’s a great artist, and is as good a woman as ever stepped. She shall be well boomed in Dublin. That fellow St. Errol is after her, but he is not up to her mark—I know that.”

Mrs. Tooney took in the full meaning of the words, and all the womanhood in her came to the front.

“I do not approve of your engagement—you know that, Larry—but you shall not hurt Kate by displaying devotion to any one else while she is under my roof.”

“My dear mother, you may safely allow me to exhibit any amount of friendship and devotion to Mrs. Clifford. ‘A perfect woman, nobly planned.’ I only hope that when I marry Kathleen Mrs. Clifford will be a friend to my wife.”

“And I suppose you’ll be marrying now very soon, Larry?”

Larry looked out of the window and whistled softly.

“You’re not sorry for what you have done, Larry? You don’t regret that you have won this little orphan’s heart and pledged yourself to be her loyal husband and protector so long as you both do live?”

“No, I don’t regret any of that part of it. But I am in a hole about money—in an awful hole.”

“Debts?”

“Worse than debt.”

“My darling boy, your father will meet anything within reason.”

“It’s beyond reason. I have been betting. Oh yes, I know I’ve been an ass, but most men are asses in their time, and now——”

“What now?”

“I can’t meet my debts of honor. It’s a case of fleeing the country or paying up to-morrow. Can you work the latter for me with the dad?”

“Larry, tell me the worst at once, at once now, my boy, and I’ll brave everything for you.”

“I’ve used a thousand pounds of the city funds, and unless I can repay it to-morrow before anything is discovered I am ruined, dishonored, disgraced forever.”

For a minute Mrs. Tooney was steeped in such an agony of woe that she could not speak. Then she found herself able to say :

“If I die in the doing, Larry, I’ll ask for it ; but you must please your father, give up this miserable engagement to Kathleen Devoran, and marry Miss O’Shea.”

“Why?”

It was a hard question to be asked by a son. It was a harder one to be answered by a mother.

“Why? Because she can make your path a golden one, and poor little Kathleen will make it rugged for you and herself if you’re ever rash enough to marry her.”

Larry only laughed in reply.

“Why do you laugh, Larry?”

“Because there is so much ado about nothing made

about me. Kathleen loves whate'er she looks on, and her looks go everywhere. I'm built very much in the same way, I'm afraid. She has fascinated me, and I think I love her now ; but if it will be better for the little girl to go back to peace, prosperity, England, and Captain Bentick, I will not say her nay. But she must decide the question. Don't any of you be cool or cross to her. If you get me that thousand pounds, I'll marry her at once, and then I know you will treat her as your daughter. If I can't get it I shall have to get away, and she will have to wait. Poor little girl !”

“Poor little girl indeed !” said his mother. “Do you mean to say that after all this you are not prepared to marry Miss Devoran unless your father is prepared to do what I regard as impossible ?”

Larry cogitated for a few moments. He was not a bad fellow ; there was nothing mean or underhand about him. If he had been the happy possessor of several thousands a year, he would have gone as straight as any man in Great Britain or Ireland. As it was, he felt that he was going to fail and let himself down in the estimation of his family and of the girl whose heart he had captured.

“Let me do Kathleen all the honor I can, mother ; help me to make her feel that there's no greater lady in Dublin than herself the night I give the party in her honor. And after that——”

“What, Larry ?”

“Try and teach her that she has had a lucky escape from me, unless my father will come forward with the dollars and save my name and honor.”

“Both shall be saved,” his mother said ; and then Larry bowed himself at his mother's knees, and told

her that everything should be as she would have it with him.

"Your father is very much set against this marriage, Larry. Is your heart entirely in it?"

"It's no use proclaiming that my heart is in it unless I have the money in it too. I am very, very much in love, and very much in debt. Now you see how the case lies. If Kathleen is wise she will throw me over, though, mind you, it will be a bitter blow to me if she does it. If she does I it shall be able to weather the storm without impoverishing my father and all of you."

"It's a dreadful alternative, Larry."

"Yes, not a pleasant one, by any means. Alternatives are rarely pleasant. The dagger and the cup of cold poison are the ones offered to the majority of human beings at some juncture in their lives. Will you speak to Kathleen to-night?"

Mrs. Tooney put her hands up to her head, and held it tightly.

"I'll speak to your father about the money first, Larry. The matter about Miss Devoran must wait until I have this heavier trouble off my mind."

Larry laughed sweetly.

"Meantime I shall be getting more and more in love with Kathleen, and she with me," he said blithely. "Well, I will have my little gathering in her honor to be arranged by you and Doreen. Short invitations are best in such cases. Mrs. Clifford, otherwise Dalma, will arrive by to-morrow's boat. My man will do all the catering; you needn't trouble yourself about that. But I should like Kathleen to order, select, and arrange all the flower part of the affair. I want her to be the queen of the night, however things turn out. The

tale of her taste in the matter of decorations shall be told all over Dublin, however things go."

"Why do you harp on that mouldered string, Larry?" his mother asked anxiously.

"Because I can't help feeling that it's just possible I may have spoilt a nice girl's life by letting her know I love her before I am in a position to marry her. If I were a shade more reckless than I am, I should run away with her at once. As it is——"

He paused, and his mother asked tearfully:

"Out with it, Larry; tell me the worst at once."

"There's nothing much worse to tell than I have told you already. If my father can pull me out of this hole, I shall be able to hold up my head, and marry Kathleen honorably, openly in the face of day. If he can't or won't do it, I shall have to quit the country, or marry Miss O'Shea's money-bags. Which would you rather I should do, mother?"

"The honorable thing," she replied, without a moment's hesitation—"neither quit the country nor marry Miss O'Shea. *My* son was born to a better fate and a manlier work than that of a deserter or a money-hunter."

"By Jove! you're right. I'll stop and face the music, mother," he said, going over as he spoke, and giving her a hearty kiss. "But it will be a difficult tune to dance to, I think."

"I'll make the steps as easy for you as I can, Larry. Your father and your sisters would make any sacrifice for you; and as for myself—well, I'm your mother, and that's saying enough. But I wish this little Kathleen had not come into your life. As it is——"

"As it is, you must help me to make her feel that I

shall never regret that she has come into my life, mother. You must help me to be as true as steel to her."

"And that I'll do," said Mrs. Tooney.

* * * * *

A more radiantly happy girl never trod this earth than Stella when she walked out of The Hulk after the explanatory interview with Mr. Ledger which resulted in the revelation that he was the father of both Mrs. Clifford and herself. To have found a father and a sister in one day was such an overpowering joy to the girl who had yearned all her life for a name and people of her own that she gave up her intended visit to the Benticks, and went up to town by an earlier train to see Mrs. Stanley, and let Stanley know that she was no longer a nameless waif and stray. Mrs. Ogilvie went with her, and Mrs. Clifford remained with the father who had been so strangely reunited to them.

It was a long and intricate story that had to be told. Jealousy and suspicion had wrought havoc in the lives of the Ledger Birchams, and anonymous letter-writing friends had played their cruel work only too well. The husband knew that the wife he adored was the star of another man's life. For several years he alternately neglected her, scolded her, and wronged her by his injurious suspicions. Then, at a critical period of her life, his fiery temper and ill-balanced mind made him absent himself, leaving her with a little child of nine and an unborn baby. When he came back, wife and children had melted away, as it seemed, and his frantic efforts to find them were futile. But now! Providence was good to him. He had his daughters, and the daughters freely forgave him for the wrong he

so freely confessed to have done to them and to their mother.

The only dark speck on the sun of their happiness was this—not one of them knew what had become of the wife and mother. But the mystery of her disappearance or death was sure to be cleared up sooner or later, they felt. Now that they were together again, one and all resolved to stand by the others.

The morocco case had been brought forward, and its contents proved powerful witnesses in establishing the identity of the parents and children. But only Mr. Ledger Birchan knew why the late Lord St. Errol had adopted the baby Stella, and treated her as his own child. The poor old man felt that his wife had been worshiped by one who was far too honorable to see her in the absence of her deserting husband, and this knowledge made him feel sorrowfully sure that his wife had died before Lord St. Errol brought little Stella back with him.

The new duties that thus suddenly devolved upon her, the new family ties, interests, and responsibilities, were so absorbing and sweet that Mrs. Clifford was quite unable to respond to Mr. Larry Tooney's urgent request that she would draw all Dublin to her feet as Dalma, the beautiful queen of song. But by the time he received her refusal he had far more important matters to tackle, and the party in honor of Kathleen Devoran was postponed.

* * * * *

With the reserve and delicacy that always characterized him, Stanley did not make his appearance when Mrs. Ogilvie and Stella arrived to see his wife, so Stella

was unable to break the information to him that she had found a father and a name of her own. But she bore this trifling disappointment bravely, understanding well why he stood aloof at this juncture.

Mrs. Stanley was able to see her and to speak a few words—words that convulsed Stella with emotion, though she put a strong constraint upon herself and refrained from tears.

“I have marred a young man’s life for a time,” she said; “you will try and make him happy when I am gone. I read in his face when he got your sweet letter that you held his heart. I read it again more plainly when Lord St. Errol mentioned your name when he met us in Plymouth. You mustn’t be conventional; make him happy as soon as you can.”

“Mr. Stanley has never said a word of love to me in his life, and I have been engaged to and jilted by another man—a man of whom I was desperately fond at one time. Then he got equally fond of another girl, and threw me over. No, not that—I gave him up to her! So, you see, I have had my fair share of romantic ill-luck. In future I never mean to care in *that* way for any one again. I have a father and a sister now. All the love I have to give will be given to them. Shall I tell you how I found them? Will it tire you?”

Then the story was told of how the father and daughters had come together, and by the time it was finished the nurse thought it right to intervene, and the faded woman and brilliant young girl took their last leave of one another.

Two days after this Mrs. Stanley died, and St. Errol, taking Jock with him, went up to be with his old comrade, leaving Stella and her family at the castle, all of

them now in full possession of the secret of the closed rooms and the beautiful portrait.

By general consent it was understood that Mr. Bircham, as he was now known to be and called, should have these rooms for his "very own." Other and more sumptuous apartments were at his disposal, but he hankered after these in which his wife's lifelike portrait had been so highly honored by the man she had rejected for his (Mr. Bircham's) sake.

"It pains me and does me good in a way to be in those rooms," he told his daughters; "they make me remember that I was a jealous, suspicious fool to think your mother could do anything but right, and that I was a villain to desert her."

When he spoke in that way they pitied and petted him; so he spoke in that way often, and was very happy.

Mr. and Mrs. Bentick were frequent visitors. Their love and admiration for Stella had never wavered, and their trust in her was so complete that they discussed the Devoran-Tooney difficulty with her freely.

"I am happy to say it has not retarded Basil's recovery," Mr. Bentick said one day; and his wife added:

"His strength and spirits have both improved wonderfully. I am sure he realized the mistake he had made before the climax came."

"I'm glad of that; I shouldn't like to think that Basil had got a bad blow," Stella answered cheerfully.

And Mrs. Bentick whispered:

"May we bring him here one day? Would it be painful to you in any way, dear?"

Mr. Bentick was wandering round the room looking at rare orchids.

“Painful? No, indeed! I am very fond of Basil. Poor, dear fellow! he couldn’t help liking some one better than he did me!”

She did not add, “And I can’t help liking some one better than I did him,” but she thought it.

It happened that on the very mild February day on which the Benticks thought that it would be safe for their much-prized nephew to drive as far as Errol Castle St. Errol and Stanley arrived. Stella was in the midst of her duties as tea-entertaining hostess—in fact, was just giving a cup of the refreshing beverage to the young hero who had come back wounded from the South, and who had the place of honor at her side—when St. Errol and Stanley walked in, accompanied by Jock.

The terrier’s frantic endeavors to pay equal attention to Mrs. Clifford and her sister created a happy diversion, during which each member of the company had time to recover their self-possession. Before any one had time to do more than glare at any one else, the sisters had put their heads together, and Stella was able to announce that “Dalma would sing a patriotic song or two,” and at that moment Lord St. Errol loved his young ward for her tactful grace and cleverness as he had never loved her before.

Dalma sang. How exquisitely, how beautifully, she rendered “Soldiers of the Queen” and other songs of loyalty and bravery, of love and war, can scarcely be told. Her audience all forgot themselves, and thought only of our fellow-countrymen, fighting for Britain and the Queen in that far land where they are enduring pestilence, famine, and deadly disaster for their country’s sake.

Dalma's songs seemed to bring them all nearer together in a happier way. Captain Bentick struggled up from his chair and made his way to the couch on which Mr. Ledger Birchem was lying, his eyes filled with tears of joy at the sight of the appreciation his daughter's wonderful vocal genius was receiving.

"I must congratulate you, sir," the younger man began rather timidly; "to be the father of two such daughters must make you a proud man indeed."

"I am a proud man, but I don't deserve to have such cause for my pride. Look here, young fellow: if ever you get hold of a girl as good as my wife was, and as my daughters are, don't make the mistake I made; don't be jealous before you know you have good cause to be so, and don't go and hide away from the sight and knowledge of the misery you have caused."

Captain Bentick's reply to this homily was rather vague.

"Do you think that I shall ever be forgiven for my idiotic folly?" he asked.

"By—by my daughter Stella, do you mean?"

"Yes."

"Why, she has forgiven you already. Pull yourself together, my good lad, and make a fresh start. Stella's mother forgave, but she never forgot. Stella is like her mother. Besides, you're engaged to another girl, are you not?"

"The other girl has chucked me."

"It seems to me that you have played a poor game badly—as far as women are concerned. Take my advice: go back to the front where you're sure to distinguish yourself, and then—"

"What then?"

“Why, you’ll find yourself run after by any number of pretty girls. Here comes my Stella with your uncle and aunt.”

“And my note of dismissal,” Basil thought.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TO THE FRONT.

MRS. TOONEY had gone gallantly into action and borne the brunt of the battle on behalf of her son. She had pleaded, wept, prayed, done everything, in fact, that a mother can do when fighting for the welfare—more than that, the honor—of her offspring.

Mr. Tooney had remained inexorable. On one condition only would he come to the assistance of his son. That condition was a terrible one to Mrs. Tooney, though she disliked the prospect of the Devoran alliance quite as much as her husband did. The condition was this: that Larry's engagement to Miss O'Shea should be openly proclaimed on the night of the party that had been planned by Larry in Kathleen's honor. When this condition was made plain to her in the most lucid legal terms, Mrs. Tooney played her strongest card.

"If such a thing were done, I would take my daughters away from Dublin the next morning—yes, and take Kathleen Devoran with me, and never return to it."

"You would surely not do anything so idiotically rash?"

"I surely should."

Mr. Tooney pondered for a moment. Then he said :

“ Is it gambling and betting ? ”

“ That’s the primary cause of it,” she murmured.

He mused again for a few minutes that seemed hours to Larry’s mother. Then he said :

“ Look here, now. This is what I’ll do for my boy, if he will promise *through you* that he will—in a decent way, of course—get out of this entanglement with Kathleen Devoran. Miss O’Shea would give her eyes for him ; and why wouldn’t she, indeed, and he one of the grandest fellows in Dublin ?—I’ll go farther than that, and say in Ireland. If he’ll pledge his honor to me *through you* that he will engage himself to Miss O’Shea, and keep the affair dark for a time, or run away with her and make an end of the matter at once, I’ll undertake to smooth things over with the Benticks, and Kate will be no worse off than when she came here.”

Mrs. Tooney shuddered. Then she called up her courage, and said : “ And you’ll give Larry the money at once—this very hour ? ”

“ I will ; but why you should be in such a hurry about it, I can’t tell. Bring me his written promise to accept my condition, and I’ll give you the cheque.”

She clasped her hands behind her head with a gesture of indescribable relief. Things might have been so much worse for Larry.

“ There’s Miss O’Shea to be reckoned with, you must remember,” she said to her husband.

“ She’ll accept him fast enough, never fear. If she does not, the fault will not be hers, if he proposes to her. I shall feel, if he does, that he has kept to his part of the bargain, and I shall not repent of mine.”

Mrs. Tooney heaved a sigh of relief.

"I will go to Larry at once," she said.

She carried out her mission so well that Larry accepted his father's terms and cheque, after delivering himself of a few nicely-worded scruples. Having done that, he prepared to enjoy himself to the best of his ability at the party which he had originally intended should be given in Kathleen's honor.

It was a brilliant gathering, for Larry Tooney was a popular man in Dublin. There was a rare gathering of fair women and brave men.

But perhaps the most brilliantly-accountered person in the room was Miss O'Shea. Personally bereft of her plumage, she was not dazzling. Large and tall, with a fair, freckled, snub-nosed face, surmounted by a head of dull brown hair, and illumined by a pair of lack-luster eyes of a yellowish tint, the great heiress would never have won King Cophetua "barefooted and in rags." But in her war-paint she made eyes unaccustomed to look at her in her full-dress glory blink. A V-shaped stomacher of diamonds almost concealed the front of her dress of saffron-colored satin, entirely veiled in the richest old Mechlin lace. The sleeves of this bodice were bands of diamonds. Three fillets of diamonds held her dull hair in place around her badly-held head. Her throat was too short to admit of her wearing more than one necklace of these gems round it. But she made up for this by wearing so many bracelets on her brawny arms that she bruised every one with whom she collided when she was dancing. She represented boundless wealth as opposed to the cultured taste of every other woman in the room, and Larry felt himself to be the battle-field on which these opposing forces met.

He looked at Miss O'Shea, and his hitherto always buoyant soul sank within him as he realized that the wearer of the gems would be always with him if he fulfilled the promise he had given to his father through his mother. But how binding that promise was ! If he broke it, how his mother's heart would ache ! If he kept it, how his own heart would ache for himself ! In order to drive away dull care for a few minutes, he danced with Kathleen, and in the course of the brief time he spent with her he asked :

"Kathleen, which would you rather it should be : that I should free you and let you go back to happiness and prosperity with Bentick, or come away with me and share a scamp's life ?"

The poor little girl's warm, impulsive heart beat all too quickly for her worldly welfare. But she preserved a dignified air, as she answered :

"Neither prosperity with Captain Bentick nor a share in a scamp's life, but a share in yours, Larry."

A ball rose in his throat that nearly choked him. He could never have played successfully the part of villain on the stage. He felt too keenly and showed his feelings too openly.

"Kathleen, you are worlds too good for me," he managed to say at last. "Will you be brave and strong, and shut your ears to anything that you may hear against me to-morrow ?"

"That I will."

He had taken her out into a palm-decorated passage, and as he spoke he stooped and kissed her brow.

"Dear little girl ! poor little girl ! You've raised my soul sufficiently to make me say to you farewell."

"Larry !"

But Larry was gone to resume his public duties as host, and Kathleen was left alone with the palms and her own reflections.

Poor little girl indeed ! There had been nothing light or uncertain in his tone and manner when he spoke the words that were the knell of hope and love to Kathleen. He had meant them. She felt sure of that. But she was a gallant soldier's daughter, and after that one expression of pain which found its vent in the single word "Larry !" she controlled herself, and went through the rest of the evening with a calm demeanor, a white face, and an aching heart. But no one guessed she was suffering from this latter, for she had the courage of her father's race, and held herself proudly.

But it was a terrible time for her. She saw Larry dancing with Miss O'Shea, and looking into Miss O'Shea's dull eyes as if he were interested in her idle, vapid talk.

"What have I done to deserve this ?" poor Kathleen asked herself. Then conscience arose and smote her. As Larry was treating her now, so had she treated Captain Bentick. She was as false to another man as Larry Tooney was to her. "I deserve it," she said to herself, but the saying it brought her no comfort.

The knowledge that she had broken her troth came home to her in that hour, and stung her sharply. The man to whom she had pledged herself first was an honorable gentleman, the saviour of her father, her own loyal friend. The man for whose sake she had thrown over this loyal friend had paid her back in her own coin—in other words, had turned deserter.

Poor little girl indeed ! She felt utterly crushed,

but no one would have guessed it. Women are as high-couraged as men when their best feelings are called into action, as Kathleen's were this night. Full of pain as her heart was for herself, her first thought was to save the family who had been kind to her from feeling even embarrassment on her account. So she flung away all appearance of depression, and appeared to be the blithest, merriest girl in the room.

The hardest part she had to play that night was when Miss O'Shea sailed down upon her, as she thought herself safely harbored in a corner. The great heiress had a shrewd suspicion of how matters stood between Larry and this meagerly-endowed young lady, who had not even the merit of being wholly Irish. To ignore her would be the very best Miss Devoran would ask at her hands, the heiress felt intuitively. So she resolved to patronize and "be kind" to her in front of the best Dublin society.

"I want to know your mother's pretty little friend, Miss Devoran," she said, as she and Larry were strolling through the palm-adorned corridor.

"My mother will introduce you to her with pleasure," he said quickly.

"I want you to introduce us to each other," she replied. "Come, now; there she is, sitting alone in that corner. It's a good opportunity."

To Larry it was a hateful opportunity, but he was compelled to take it. With the easiest air he could assume he brought up the purse-proud girl to whom hard fate had compelled him to surrender, and introduced her to the graceful little lady whose horizon he had darkened. His punishment followed quick upon his offense, as he marked the demeanor of the two. He felt that it was

a scene that would live forever in his memory—the high-bred calm of the one girl, the absurdly elated manner of the other. He winced as he stood by, looking on, and felt that indeed his sin had found him out.

* * * * *

Lord St. Errol had come to the conclusion many weeks before this that his life was an aimless and useless one in the face of the facts of the great war. He had accordingly put himself in the hands of a past-master in the art of horsemanship. His instructor was one who knew and could practically teach every detail of military riding. Stirrupless, bridleless, heavily accoutered, St. Errol was now able to take any obstacle that was put up in the military riding-schools. He had also given himself a good course of work in the hunting-field, and was a match now for even a Mexican buck-jumper, which he had got for the sake of experience. Accordingly, when the Imperial Yeomanry was started, he was one of the first to volunteer. His services were accepted, and the day of his departure was drawing very near.

Stella could express her grief, mingled with pride, at his going openly; Mrs. Clifford could not speak about it. She had “no right” to take an interest in him, therefore she dared not show it. So, after the manner of weak womanhood, she grew cool and distant, avoided him as much as possible, devoted herself to her father entirely in public, and held Jock’s sympathetic paw with tears in private.

Jock seemed to know all about it so well. When the whole party were assembled, he would sit and look wistfully at his master, offer a paw, and when that had been taken and shaken, he would trot over to Mrs. Clifford and repeat the performance with her. In his

dear doggy way he tried all he could to bring these two together, and his disappointment was patent to every one.

The liner in which St. Errol was to sail was to leave Southampton in a week. It was a time of extreme tension, and in the midst of it Mrs. Clifford received a liberal offer to sing at the Crystal Palace.

The terms were good. Accordingly the young widow went, and was about to sing, when there was a curious diversion.

Mr. Lord George Sanger's circus had been in possession of the Crystal Palace for some time. On this special day something had arisen which had annoyed the elephants. These worthies are rather difficult to deal with when annoyed. They have a way of taking things into their own hands and trunks which is apt to be disconcerting to their human fellow-creatures, and two of them were irritable and took this way that day.

Dalma had just walked on to the concert-platform, when the news was noised through the building that two of the elephants had broken loose and were rambling about. Secure in the consciousness of being safely protected (as she thought) by stout masonry and thick plate glass, the beautiful diva sang out the opening lines of her first number. Her rich, brilliant soprano notes were ringing thrillingly through the place, when they were suddenly accompanied by a trumpeting that was as terrifying as it was unexpected. The sweet soprano fled, followed by her audience, and the elephant walked quietly through the concert-room and broke chairs and everything else that came in his way.

The episode was startling to Dalma's nerves, but

good for her professionally. In the slang language of the day, it "boomed" her well. The management at once offered her such splendid terms that she did not feel justified in refusing them. And while she waited in London St. Errol's orders came, and at a few hours' notice he had to join his company and be off to the front.

Happily for him and for all who loved and were interested in him, he had only a few hours in which to prepare to make ready and be off. The long-drawn-out agony of waiting for many days for orders to join after receiving the commission can only be understood by those who have undergone it, and those who have had to stand by and see them undergo it. The tension is so awful that it strains the heartstrings of the bravest men and women, and the latter have the bitterest part of it. For the men who go have action, fame, honor, distinction, in front of them, while the women have to stay at home with their memories. In fact, it is the old story which is always new, "Men must work and women must weep."

The ones who work have by far the happier part of the portion allotted to us. Work is so infinitely to be preferred to wailing or waiting in idleness.

But before he went he felt that he must say something to Mrs. Clifford's father about the deep attachment, love, and reverence he had for her. Even if she had been with them, his delicate thought for her would have made him refrain from speaking words of love to her. But now he was going away, possibly never to return. So he told his tale and uttered his hopes to Mr. Ledger Bircham, and had the happiness of hearing from Stella that he was well loved by her sister in return.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BRAVE AND TRUE.

THE way Stella gave the information that was so precious to St. Errol was very characteristic. From her father she learnt that St. Errol had spoken out to him openly like an honorable gentleman. At the same time she learnt that, with the not unusual selfishness of age, Mr. Ledger Bircham was very much disinclined to part with a daughter whom he had only just recovered, and who ministered to all his wants, wishes, and whims admirably.

“I have told him plainly that she has had enough of the marriage state, that she is devoted to her ‘profession’ or ‘art,’ or whatever you call it, and have requested that he will not disturb her peace of mind by asking her to engage herself to him before he goes. Why, bless my heart, we should never have an hour’s quietude ! If she didn’t hear from him she would fret herself to death and worry me ; and if she heard he was wounded matters would be worse. From every point of view, it is better he should go away leaving her free.”

“From my point of view, he will do a foolish thing if he does not speak out to Dalma before he goes,” Stella said firmly.

Inaction had made Mr. Bircham irritable. Irritability was making him unjust and peevish.

"I wonder at your giving such counsel," he said dryly.

"Why?"

"Captain Bentick spoke out to you before he went, and——"

"Found out that he cared more for some one else before he came back. Yes, father, I remember all that part of my life's story very well. But Basil Bentick was driven by circumstances, and he hasn't St. Errol's strong, steadfast nature."

"Marriage in our family has invariably been attended with unhappiness," Mr. Bircham murmured solemnly. "My father and mother separated on the ground of incompatibility of temper. Your poor dear mother utterly failed to understand me. Dalma married a selfish, cold-blooded fellow who made her life one of self-abnegation and misery, and now you want to urge her on to take another false step."

Stella loved her father dearly, but her patience had come to an end.

"If she takes a step towards St. Errol, it will not be a false one," she said, and then retreated hastily before her father could answer her.

St. Errol and his ward had from the first been warmest, truest friends. There was nothing that she could do that he could misunderstand. A warm-hearted girl—true as steel. Whatever she did he knew would be done in the right direction.

So he felt that things were going fairly well with him, when, after her interview with her father, she found him out somewhere in the grounds, and said, as

she took him gently a prisoner by laying a hand on his arm :

“ Dear St. Errol, you are not my guardian any longer, but you are more—you are like a dear brother to me. I know that you have told father that you love my sister Dalma.”

“ I have.”

“ And he ? ”

“ Wishes me to say nothing to her until I come back—if I ever do come back.”

“ You shall not go away without letting her know that your heart is hers, as hers is yours,” Stella said pathetically.

“ Do you think she cares for me—cares enough for me to pledge herself to a fellow who may most likely never come back to redeem his pledge to her ? Your father wants her to be left free ; but understand, Stella, I feel myself bound. No other woman shall ever bear my name or hold my heart.”

“ I understand and believe you ; but she ought to know the beautiful truth, too. Oh, St. Errol ! dear St. Errol ! don't go away without giving her a piece of the only heart's-case women care for. I know I am doing wrong in acting against my father's wishes. I know I am acting rather a strange part in asking you to ask my sister to be your wife before you leave for the front. I know that a girl ought not to put such a difficult case plainly before a man. But Dalma is so dear, so very dear, to me, and you come next.”

“ You're the dearest and bravest of girls, and if I'm ever happy enough to be your brother, it will be in 'love' as well as in 'law,' my dear Stella.”

She began to dance about on the lawn, and to sing

little snatches of songs which she had caught up from her sister Dalma ; and then, in the moment of her giving expression to the joyousness of having made things clear between Dalma and St. Errol, Stanley came in and misunderstood the situation.

She was flirting with St. Errol, he thought, and he (St. Errol) was the better man, he told himself. As he thought this, Jock came up to him, jumping and barking with delight, and so made his presence known to St. Errol and Stella.

There had been too many misunderstandings in her own case for Stella to be over nicely scrupulous now. Her sister's happiness was at stake, and that was dearer to her than any little point of etiquette. Accordingly she stepped up to Stanley before he could beat a retreat, and said :

" Congratulate me—congratulate me heartily. St. Errol is going to marry my sister, and I think I must be the happiest girl in England."

Her love and thought for others, her joy in their joy touched him deeply, and endeared her to him more than ever.

More than ever. But still the vein of obstinacy in his nature kept him from declaring how much he loved her, and how he longed to claim her for his own. Moreover, he labored under the delusion that she still loved Basil Bentick, and he was too proud to fight that possibility. So all he said in response to her outburst of enthusiasm was :

" I am glad you're so happy about it. St. Errol is one of the best chaps living."

" And my sister is the very sweetest of women. No one but I knows what she endured in her life with Mr.

Clifford. His desertion was not the worst part of it. Poor Dalma ! When I think of what she endured, I could cry from happiness to think that she will have such a friend, such a splendid friend and husband, as St. Errol will be to her."

As they spoke they sauntered down towards the lake. It was a lovely sunny March morning. The lawns were carpeted richly with snowdrops and every variety of crocus, from snow-white ones to every shade of gold and violet. The boyhood of the year is a very beautiful period, especially when there are no easterly winds about. The brightness and beauty of it all impressed Stella deeply and subdued the exuberant joy she had been expressing a few moments before. Presently, when they came to the border of the lake, Stanley broke a rather long silence :

"Do you remember coming here the day I first knew you and picking water-lilies ?"

"I have never forgotten it."

"Nor have I. Now I will gather a few snowdrops and white violets for you. Will you take them from me ?"

She bent her head in assent. She had no words at command. Was he going to speak at last ? she asked herself, or would he never forget and forgive her brief inconstancy with Captain Bentick ? As she thought this, she looked at him as he handed her the few flowers he had gathered and tied together with a slender blade of grass—looked at him with such pathetic pleading in her pretty eyes that he read the secret she had never revealed before. Even then he made a stout effort to forbear uttering the words of love that were filling his heart ; but the strain was too strong, it overpowered him.

"Stella, you must have known how much I have

loved you all this time!" he said, grasping the hand that held the flowers he had just given her.

"I did not know; I only hoped you did," she said frankly; and the world went very well with them then for an hour or two.

He told her much of his early life that she had never known or dreamt of before. It had been a life of hardship and solitariness until he met with St. Errol and Jock. His parents had died when he was a little boy of ten, and then he had been given food and a home of a sad kind by a grandmother, who had disliked his mother, and never forgiven her son for the marriage, of which Stanley and one sister were the results. When his grandmother died, she left her money to various charities, with the exception of fifty pounds to Stanley, with the expressed hope that he "would use it wisely and well, and by means of it carve out an honorable career for himself." The words were neither cheering nor affectionate.

But Stanley acted upon them, nevertheless. He spent that fifty pounds to such good purpose that he passed first in a stiff competitive examination, and became an Admiralty clerk. Then the solitude which had been the cross of his life was over, for at the office he met St. Errol, and their comradeship began—a comradeship built on such manly, honorable lines that it is never likely to end.

They had got into the boat, and were rowing slowly about the lake, reminding each other of little incidents in their past intercourse, and feeling happy as only lovers can feel, when a footman appeared on the bank and waved to them in an excited way that prompted them to row faster and hear what his mission might be.

It was that Mr. Ledger Bircham desired the presence of his daughter at once.

"We won't say anything to my father about our engagement to-day ; let him get over Dalma's and St. Errol's first," she said, as they walked back to the castle ; and he acquiesced in her wish, though he would far rather have had a clear and open understanding with Stella's father at once. But he was love loyal to the least wish of his heart's queen, and so consented to keep their engagement private for a time.

"You see," Stella argued, "poor dear father feels that he has himself to blame for having left his daughters to their own devices all these years. That feeling makes him wish to show the world that we are quite happy and content to stay with him now. Don't be impatient ; it won't be for long. As soon as his leg is quite well he will take up his beloved gardening again, and won't be so greedy for his daughters' society."

"But he will surely never go back to The Hulk. He will live with the St. Errols."

"I don't know. My father is a very proud man, and he has lived a life of dull independence for so many years that I think he would find it irksome to live in another man's house. He tells me that all these years that he has lived at The Hulk he never spoke to any one of his own class until Mrs. Ogilvie and I picked him up the day he broke his leg. That kind of life unfits a man for social and domestic life, especially in another man's house. We both love our father dearly, but I think he will be happier in his own way in his own home than with either of us."

"Your will shall always be my law, my dearest dear !" and when he told her that, Stella made a strong

resolve that she would never "will" anything of which she was not quite sure he would approve.

How could her heart ever have strayed from him? she wondered; but that it had done so she admitted with shame to herself. Basil Bentick had fascinated her, and she had fluctuated from Stanley, but now she had returned never to waver again.

She knew where to find her father. He was sure to be in the room where her dead mother's portrait was enshrined. She went into the room in a glad, gay, buoyant way, with the words, "Here I am, dear father," and then checked herself into a more demure demeanor as she saw he had a guest with him, for whose presence she was entirely unprepared.

* * * * *

Larry Tooney was voted by a lot of impecunious young men to be "the luckiest fellow in Dublin" the day after the gathering he had given in Kathleen's honor. His engagement to Miss O'Shea was publicly announced, and if he had been a Prince of the Blood Royal the civic authorities could scarcely have shown him more honor. Men envied him for having secured the great heiress. Girls envied her for having secured the brilliant Larry. There was only one poor little heart that could not rejoice about it, and that one asked in silence in a way that was pitiful to behold.

Mrs. Tooney and her daughters took counsel together as to how they should best and most considerately break it to her. But Kathleen knew and understood it all through every nerve and fiber of her being before they approached her on the subject.

They were all so extra tender and considerate for her when she went down to breakfast that morning that she

felt compelled to take her courage in her hands and show mercy to these unwilling enemies who so longed to spare her feelings. So when she had fortified herself with a cup of coffee and a morsel of dry toast, she tried to aid them by saying :

“ I know you are all wishing to be kind and break it gently to me, but Larry did the right thing last night.”

“ Did he tell you ? ” they all exclaimed.

“ Not in so many words ; but he offered me my freedom from my engagement to him, and I took it. Don’t cry, Mrs. Tooney. Larry has not behaved dishonorably. Last night he gave me the option of sharing his life or of leaving him. I knew that if I shared his life his lot would be a hard one, so I have left him free—to Miss O’Shea and prosperity.”

She had not thought out her speech before uttering it. It came straight from her gallant little heart, and each one of her hearers felt that it did so.

Mrs. Tooney and her daughters sobbed openly. To hear the son and brother whom they all adored defended by the girl to whom they felt he had behaved badly moved their warm Irish hearts to infinite pity and tenderness. But Mr. Tooney could not find relief for his feelings in tears. He was made of stern stuff. But his heart bled now for his old friend’s daughter.

He realized that it was his hand which had planted the dagger in her heart. If he had helped Larry unconditionally, Larry would not have sold himself to the heiress. As it was—well, he would “ think the thing out, and provide for the girl as if she were his own daughter.”

But Kathleen was not to be disposed of as easily as he thought.

CHAPTER XXX.

CLEARING THE AIR.

“PARTING may be such sweet sorrow” when you are parting from the loved one for a brief period, and you know that the loved one is going away into safety or almost certain safety. But when a mother knows that the son she idolizes is going unquestionably for years, or it may be forever, or when one is parting from a lover only just gained, there is very little sweetness about the sorrow.

St. Errol’s orders to join had come. As usual in these stirring times, they were sharp, decisive, and peremptory. He was to start at once and make his way to Southampton without delay, and Stella was painfully sure that he would be obliged to go away without giving her sister the right that is dearest to a woman—namely, that of showing an open and tender interest in him.

“Unless,” she communed with herself—“unless I do something for them. And I’ll do it, too,” she added resolutely.

Stanley was not by to take counsel with. So she took counsel of her own affectionate heart and despatched a telegram to her sister entreating her to meet the liner by which St. Errol would leave the next morning. She

added : "It's a matter of life and death ; and having done this, she felt less miserable when she took leave of St. Errol.

Mr. Ledger Bircham was grimly gratified at the suddenness of it, also by Dalma's being away at the time.

"As it is," he said to Stella, "the young fellow—and nice fine young fellow he is—goes away without any humbugging thoughts of the girl he leaves behind him."

"I'm not so sure about that, father," Stella said demurely.

He looked at her thoughtfully for a moment or two, thought better of uttering them, and said :

"I wonder how my garden looks. I was a long time getting it to its present state of perfection, and now I suppose that boy has turned it into a wilderness. Where is Stanley ?"

"Gone with St. Errol to see him off."

"I thought perhaps he would have ridden over to have a look at the place for me." Then he went on to bemoan himself, and say how hard it was to be laid by the leg. "If it had been in action I shouldn't have cared. But to be here doing nothing because I was idiot enough to slip over a stile is hard."

"Don't mind it, dad dear. If it hadn't been for that, you would never have known us."

The old sailor was touched in a moment, and to hide the emotion he felt he said quickly.

"Now I wonder, my dear child, if you would drive over to The Hulk, and have a look at the garden ?"

"Of course I will. You're very fond of that garden, are you not, father ?"

“It was my only friend-companion for ten years.”

“Poor father!” she said compassionately; and then she went up and kissed him, and he thought it might be her mother. How like—how very like!

She ordered her cobs to go and look after the garden and the boy, after providing her father with a plentiful supply of war-picture papers. He delighted in reading about the gallantry shown by our blue-jackets especially, and shed tears of love in his heart at being unable any longer to be one of them.

Then he began to think that, though his fighting days were over he might still do some good service in another field. He might do battle against the selfish desire he had to keep his daughters entirely to himself. His determination to do this made him almost sorry that he had said what he had to Stella about St. Errol and Dalma. It was too late now. St. Errol was gone.

While he was fidgeting himself into a state of remorse about the way in which he possibly might have marred the happiness for life of one daughter, the other was driving rapidly to The Hulk. As her groom got out at the entrance, a man on horseback rode up, and, with a little cry of surprise and pleasure, she recognized Basil Bentick. She got out to walk up to the house, and Captain Bentick dismounted and walked by her side.

“I am so glad to see you,” she said warmly. “I thought you were gone. But I suppose you will soon be off now?”

“Very soon. The day after to-morrow I sail from the Albert Docks.”

“And St. Errol to-morrow from Southampton.”

They were both silent and serious for a few minutes ; after this time he said :

“ I am glad I have seen you before I go, perhaps never to come back again. Your father would only let me see you in his presence when I called, and I felt tongue-tied. I want to tell you, Stella——”

She held her hands up in deprecation of his saying more, but he would not stop.

“ I want to tell you that the splendid way you behaved to me during my brief illness made me feel a better fellow than I ever felt before. It is a madness, I know, that you can never forget or forgive, and, as fitting, I am the sole sufferer from it.”

“ You will be very happy yet, Basil ! ”

“ Never with Kathleen Devoran, if that is what you mean. She’s a dear little girl, and I’m fond of her, in spite of the way she has spoilt my life with you. She has given me my freedom back, for which I never can be thankful enough. Oh, you needn’t look doubtful and pained ; it is true, and I rejoice at it.”

“ But I don’t understand,” Stella said slowly. “ Basil, what have you done to make her give you your freedom ? ”

He smiled.

“ Don’t look tragic about it ; I should have stuck to her through everything if she had wished me to do it, though my doing it would have been a mere matter of honor. But when she wrote and told me she loved another fellow better, and meant to marry him, I don’t see that she had very much option in the case.”

“ Who is the man ? ” Stella asked.

“ A Mr. Tooney, the son of the house where she is staying. She has written and told my aunt all

about it. So she is going to be happy in her own way."

"As you will be in yours, Basil, I hope," she said kindly.

"That I never can be."

"Oh yes, you will! You tell me in one breath that you are grateful to her for giving you your freedom, and in the next that you can never be happy in your own way. I am sure you will; I like you so much that in the first flush of my own happiness——"

"That's it, that is my reason. But don't think me altogether a selfish fellow. I knew how it was with Stanley and you when I saw you crossing the lawn from the lake the other day, and I felt glad that I hadn't spoilt your life."

It was a difficult speech to answer, a hard nut to crack. If she said he would not have spoilt her life if he had married her as they had once intended, that would be disloyal to Stanley. If she said he would have spoilt her life, that would be cruel to him. So she remained silent for a few moments, and then said :

"I am here as my father's agent to inspect the garden and the boy; come with me, and say what ought to be just 'up' and just 'in.'"

He suggested that "peas ought to be flourishing and fit to eat; he had gallons of them in London the other day.

"And we have them at the castle under glass. But my father's gardening is conducted on more primitive lines. Oh, if he could see the weeds running rampant in this way! I wonder where that boy is?"

The boy caught sight of them as she spoke. He was sitting in the rays of the spring sun, reading a penny

dreadful and eating nuts. The way the penny dreadful and the nuts disappeared and the barrow became filled in a moment with various green-stuff, which he knew the young lady from the castle—as he still called his master's daughter—would not distinguish from weeds, was a lesson in sleight-of-hand that was highly creditable. He was always a respectful boy, and his respectfulness deepened at the approach of the young lady from the castle. He set off at a sharp trot as soon as he had touched his tattered hat to Stella and her escort two or three times, and made tracks with all speed to the neatest part of the garden, as intuition taught him they would surely follow him. This action may seem mean on his part, but it is only human, after all, to take refuge in sanctuary when in danger, and in his master's time he had always found sanctuary in the neatest part of the garden.

After she had duly questioned the boy as to what had been planted and what was coming up, Stella felt she could go home with a clear conscience, and relieve her father's mind about his beloved garden. She was on the brink of saying to Basil, "Won't he be pleased!" when she remembered that, for more reasons than one, Basil must not go home with her: farewell must be said here in the highroad in the presence of the groom.

It was an awkward moment, but, fortunately, as brief farewells are always the best, the cobs began to dance about and show off in a restive way that was an unspeakable relief to their mistress.

"Well, good-by, and God bless you and bring you safely home!" she said; and then that parting was over.

Stella went straight to her father's sanctum, and

found him with an open telegram in his hand. Her prophetic soul told her at once that it was from her sister, and that the cat was out of the bag.

"Well, dad, the garden isn't looking half bad, and the boy seemed to be very busy when we got there; he had a barrow full of weeds——"

"Who's 'we'?" her father interrupted.

"Captain Bentick. He met me at the gate, and walked in with me. He's off South directly."

"What does this mean?"

He held the telegram out to her as he spoke, and she took it with a beating heart. It was very brief, merely this:

"Will certainly—S. E. DALMA."

"It means that I wired to my sister to go and see St. Errol."

"And why did you do that?" her father asked.

"Because I love them both, and want to see them both happy."

"So do I, Stella. I've thought about many things since you and I spoke about this last. You were a good girl to do it—a good, brave, unselfish girl, just like your mother."

He looked up at his wife's portrait as he spoke, bowing his head as he did so, as a worshiper before the image of a saint.

Stella was too happy not to be magnanimous.

The concession her father had made about her sister was such a great one that Stella felt she could not put a further strain upon his feelings by speaking to him about Stanley and herself. There was no need to hurry. They had each other's society constantly—or, at least,

they would have it as soon as Stanley came back from wishing St. Errol God-speed ; and in the meantime why should she not have Mrs. Ogilvie ?

She wrote, on the spur of the moment, a warmly-worded, loving request that her old friend would come and hear the good news and rejoice with her. Of course, she had to wait three days, for Mrs. Ogilvie was not sufficiently modern to telegraph about everything, whether it were of sufficient importance to warrant doing so or not.

When the answer did come, there was a paragraph in it which exercised Stella's curiosity greatly. It ran as follows :

" I will come in a week. At present I am undergoing a very peculiar experience, and am placed on the horns of a dilemma. Where those horns will toss me I do not know in the least."

" What can it be ? " Stella conjectured. " Can Puck have died of fatty degeneration of the heart, or is Jem leaving her ? The latter would, of course, be the greater calamity of the two."

But though she spoke thus lightly about it to her father, in her heart she felt that it must be something much more important which kept her old friend away from her now.

* * * * *

The meeting between Mrs. Clifford and St. Errol was such a pretty one. It was so unexpected on his part, and on hers it was so full of conflicting emotions—joy at seeing him, grief at his going, and fear that he would think her unwomanly for having followed him. Around them all was bustle and confusion, heart-rending farewells mingled with tender pleas and triumphant prog-

nostications of glory from friends of those going to the front.

But withal it was so brief. She seemed to have been on board hardly a minute when the cry "All visitors off!" was raised; then one grip of the hand, one eager, hungry look into each other's eyes, and then she was hustled over the side, and the unavowed lovers were separated without a linking word.

She did not realize until she found herself in the railway carriage that Stanley was with her, and then she knew that it must have been he who had half-carried her along, and lifted her into the carriage.

"How weak you must think me!" she said, with a wan smile.

"Weak, Dalma—no, but very womanly."

Then, to divert her thoughts, he told her about the full understanding which had been arrived at between Stella and himself. He told her that business would keep him in town for some little time—news that delighted her, as her own engagements would detain her in London for yet another fortnight. How these engagements poured in upon her now that she was prosperous! It was another case in point of the truth of that line in the parable, "Unto him who hath shall be given."

* * * * *

Meanwhile the Tooneys were having a trying time of it. Nothing that they could say or do would induce Larry to be an attentive lover of Miss O'Shea, and they could not blame or accuse Kathleen of having a hand in this negligence of her. She never saw him alone, and when she saw him in company she appeared to be absorbed in her own reflections and projects.

The duties of his office were so onerous just now, Larry pleaded, when his mother rebuked him for his neglect of his *fiancée*, that he really had no time to dance attendance on any girl.

"But your future wife is not 'any' girl. Just think of what you'll owe her!"

"She'll take care that I never forget it, I fancy."

"She's so fond of you, Larry."

"I am not sure that her fondness won't be the worst part of it. Now, don't tell me that I have only myself to thank for all this, mother. It's bad enough to have to go through it without that."

"She wants you to drive her out to-day."

"It's the busiest day in the week for me."

"You always say that."

"Where are the girls?"

"Doreen and Kathleen are out walking."

"What is *she* going to do?"

"She won't tell us."

Larry went and stood at the window, and drummed upon it with his fingers. When he turned round at last there was a suspicious redness round his eyes that made his mother's heart ache.

"Can you take Miss O'Shea and your sisters to the theater to-night?"

"Can't possibly. I'm dining with some of the garrison fellows to celebrate the relief of Kimberley."

As he spoke the door opened, and Miss O'Shea walked in. He rose to meet her, and she held her face up enticingly to be kissed. He just brushed her forehead with his mustache, took out his watch, and murmured something about having had no idea "it was so late."

"I've bought a pair of carriage-horses this morning,

Larry. Come for a drive, and tell me how you like them."

He repeated his excuses, and as Miss O'Shea's plain brow clouded, his mother discreetly left the room.

"How busy you always are now, Larry!"

"I am, and with me business has always come before pleasure." Then, with something of a sneer, he quoted the old lines: "In fact,

" 'I could not love thee, dear, so well,
Loved I not honor more.' "

She tried to look pleased, and failed.

"I wanted you very much this morning, Larry. I am beginning to think my coachman is not of the steadiest, and these horses are young and fresh."

He could not refuse to go with her after that, and went off with a look such as a man might wear on his way to execution.

Twice in the course of their drive they met or passed Kate and Doreen. The former bowed and smiled so affably that the heiress hated her more than ever. If Kate had looked glum and unhappy, Miss O'Shea would have experienced all those delightful sensations which do animate the hearts of some women.

"Wouldn't it be a grand thing to be married on St. Patrick's Day, Larry! I should carry a huge bouquet of shamrock."

"I thought brides wore nothing but white?"

"My going-away dress will be lovely. I sent to Paris for it."

"Aren't you afraid of its being old-fashioned before you wear it?"

"Not at all," she said sharply; and he was aware he had made a mistake.

"I meant," he explained, "that you fashionable ladies look upon a dress as old-fashioned a week after it's made."

"I am not changeable," she said significantly; and he told her he felt sure of that.

He accompanied her to her own door, which was opened by a plush-legged and powdered footman, whom he hated already, regarding him as a badge of his servitude. Then, at last, she released him, and he went back to his chambers and his delicious freedom.

When he saw his mother the following day, she had a great piece of news for him. Kathleen Devoran had left to return to England, to live with and be the adopted child of a rich and kind old lady, whose name Kathleen did not know yet.

"I hope no one is setting a trap for her, the dear little girl," Larry said menacingly.

"Why had he sold his right to protect and look after her?" he asked himself.

"She says it's through some lawyer, but I forget what his name is, too."

"So we have let her go out into the world more friendless and forlorn than when she came to us."

Mrs. Tooney sighed.

"It can't be helped," she said; and he had to acquiesce in the saying, hard as it was.

Naturally, when Mr. Tooney came home he blamed everybody but himself with much bitterness.

"She has eloped? Who's the fellow?" he asked.

"There is no fellow in the case. There was truth in

her face when she told me she was going to live with a rich old lady who was also kind."

The next thing Mrs. Tooney did was to wire off the facts of the case to the Benticks.

This telegram put the dear old people into an awful panic. They pictured to themselves that Kate was going to follow Basil to the Cape, where she would marry him.

Instantly her thoughts flew to Stella. The dear girl would understand and help them to bear this bitter blow. And all the time poor Kate was harmlessly journeying towards the new home that had been found for her.

She had a rough voyage from Kingston to Holyhead, but it gave her something to do to battle against the wind and the waves. Moreover, it is not possible to be depressed or lachrymose about anything when all your time and attention is given to keeping yourself on board the steamer.

She was not blown away, but her best and only fur-lined cape was, and that made her extremely sad when she thought about it afterwards.

However, by the time she had reached London, and made her way to the address given to her, she had forgotten her cloak in her excitement at again seeing London, which she could not remember much about, since she was only six months old when she left it.

She was safe in the kind hands of a couple who, having no children of their own, were always ready to do kindnesses to friendless boys and girls.

This one told them her whole life's story, nothing extenuating and setting down naught in malice.

By the time they parted for the night they felt like old friends.

"She's a dear little girl," the wife said, when she rejoined her husband, after showing her guest her room.

"Seems so. But what an extraordinary coincidence!"

"Ah, truth is stranger than fiction," the lady laughed.

"I hope she will be here for some time; it will be quite a pleasure to me to have a young girl to take about with me."

"Yes; it gives you such a fine excuse for gadding about more than you do already," her husband laughed good-humoredly.

When Mrs. Bentick arrived, tear-stained and trembling, at the castle, Stella's first thought was that some calamity had happened to Basil; but when she had heard the story she was able to completely reassure the good lady by telling her of her (Stella's) last interview with Basil at the Hall.

His aunt cried, and murmured:

"How dreadfully the poor boy must have felt it!"

"We both felt it."

"And is it true that you're engaged to Mr. Stanley?"

"It is; but I am waiting for my sister to come home before I tell my father."

"I did hope—I did hope——"

"Please don't hope that," Stella cried.

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN SEARCH OF HER.

"I AM glad that the horns of the dilemma have tossed you here," Stella said, as she rushed into Mrs. Ogilvie's extended arms. "And now quick, tell me what *is* the dilemma?"

"As soon as I have recovered my breath I will tell you, and when you hear what it is you'll admit that truth is stranger than fiction. How happy you look, dear!"

"Happy! I am so happy that words can't express my happiness. You would be the same if you were engaged to marry Guy Stanley."

"My dear Stella, please respect my gray hairs. Stanley and you might be my grandchildren, so I may take a grandmother's pride and pleasure in you both. How wonderfully, how blessedly, things have worked out for you, dear child!"

"They have indeed. I have found a father, sister, and lover all at once, and they are each exactly what I wish them to be—that is, perfect. And what a friend I have in you!—the best, kindest, truest friend a girl could have."

"I hope to be the same to another young girl who is truly in need of a friend now, Stella."

"Is she your 'dilemma'?"

“She is—Kathleen Devoran.”

“How did you come to know her? When, where, and why have you taken her in my place?”

“Gently, and don’t be impatient and unjust. I am getting old—in fact, I have got old—and I love to have young life about me. You who have been as a daughter to me have formed new ties very naturally. So one day, when the sense of my loneliness was very strong upon me, I thought of trying to secure the companionship, and I hoped the love, of some young girl who should be as a daughter to me—be to me what you were, in fact. The ways of advertising were unknown to me, so I went to Mr. Smithers, who had been the means of bringing us together, Stella. I told him that if he could find a girl—a lady—unhampered by family ties, I would adopt her and treat her as my own child in every way.”

Mrs. Ogilvie paused, being a little out of breath. Stella’s attitude of silent, intent listening was not encouraging. As Mrs. Ogilvie ceased speaking, jealous Stella put in the words rather sharply :

“And he found Miss Devoran for you?”

“He advertised, and the reply to the advertisement that struck and pleased him most came from Miss Devoran. She described herself graphically as homeless, friendless, and forlorn.”

“What nonsense!” Stella said energetically. “She jilted Basil Bentick for an Irishman who, in turn, has jilted her for a girl with money-bags. Have you got her at the cottage? has she taken possession of you and all belonging to you already?”

“She is staying with Mrs. Smithers until I can go back and make a home for her.”

“Have you seen her? Do you like her?”

“I have only seen her once, and I like her very much. She bared her poor little heart to me during our brief interview.”

“And you’ll be as fond of her as you are—as you *were*—of me. I shall never like her. I shall never forgive her for having taken my place with you.”

“Yes, you will, dear. You forgave her when she took your place with Basil Bentick.”

“Yes; I didn’t feel a bit jealous then,” Stella said dispassionately. “But this is different. You have been like a mother, and now this girl steps in and will rob me of a lot of your motherly love.”

“She will not rob you of a bit of it.”

“Guy Stanley and I had arranged that we would take a house close to yours in town, and that when we go out of town we should spend our time at the cottage with you.”

“That arrangement meets my views exactly, dear child.”

“No, no; it can’t hold good now. I am supplanted.”

“Guy Stanley and you will not rest contented for long with migrating between London and the cottage. And when you are away from me you will be glad to think that I have some one who will look after me, and be kind and sympathetic.”

“What makes you think she will be kind and sympathetic?”

“What made me think you would be these things when I saw you first, dear? It was your face, your voice, your manner. I saw that in you heart and head were blended so perfectly that if we didn’t fit the fault would be mine.”

“And you see all this in her?” Stella cried. “Oh, it is hard, horribly hard, that you should be prepared to love Kathleen Devoran as well as you do me!”

“As you reminded yourself and me just now, you have found a father, sister, and lover all at once. You can well afford to let me give a little affection to a girl who is left without relations or friends. Think of her desolate position!”

Stella nearly melted, but she steeled herself against the softer mood which she felt was approaching, and made an effort to deal one more blow at the enemy.

“If she had behaved honorably, and stuck to Basil Bentick, she would have been one of their family, and had plenty of friends by this time.”

“And now take me to see your father,” Mrs. Ogilvie said good-temperedly. “A good talk about the Hall, and the garden, and the boy will do us good.”

It did them good, for Mrs. Ogilvie had come down primed with all sorts of little bits of information concerning the war and the ways of our generals which had not crept into the newspapers. She had many friends at the front, and these had managed to let her know why Methuen had seemed to lag, and why Plumer had retreated when within fourteen miles of Mafeking. She had also friends who had lived in the Transvaal for many years, and who knew the Boers to the marrow of their bones. It was first-hand information that she gave them, and her graphic description of the brutality, ignorance, dirt, and general squalor of the average Boer was intensely interesting to a man in whose breast the fire of patriotism had always burnt fiercely.

“It’s an awful thing for a man to be ‘too old’ to fight for his Queen and country when every bit of

fighting blood in him is up and stirring," he said piteously ; and Stella tried to comfort him by a gentle reminder of his broken leg. " If they would only let me go to the front, I would go on crutches," he said ; and he meant it, too, dear old war-dog that he was.

" I hope St. Errol will come back safe and unwounded," Stella ventured to suggest.

The picture of her father hobbling to the war on crutches had nearly made her laugh, but she saved herself from this disgrace by thinking of St. Errol possibly wounded and thirsty under a scorching sun or a blinding rain.

" What's a wound or two to a young fellow like St. Errol ?" her father answered sharply. " He is made of the metal that is always to the fore, if I am not much mistaken about him. He will do and dare everything that a gentleman and a man should do and dare."

" And if he is killed, Dalma will die. Think of that, father."

" Women who love heroes must share the hero's fate. St. Errol will live distinguished or die distinguished. There is nothing half-hearted about him. He is made of the material that would walk into a den of lions, or go out unaccompanied into a region where the Boers are lurking behind every stone of their stone-planted veldt."

" Oh, father, father ! why wasn't I born a boy ? I would so love to fight !" eager Stella cried, with enthusiasm ; and her father understood her.

" You were not born a boy, my child ; but some day you will be the mother of a son of whom it will be said, " She must be a noble mother to have borne so brave a son !"

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The Tooneys were breakfasting quietly and comfortably. Kate Devoran's abrupt exit had ceased to disquiet them. Mr. Tooney spoke of her as unpractical, unreasonable, and ungrateful. Mrs. Tooney pitied her a great deal, and loved her a little, because she (Kate) had loved Larry Tooney. And as Larry Tooney was the apple of his mother's eye, she was well inclined to forgive Kate's weakness. The two Miss Tooneys thought it rather a good joke, and laughed about it.

"Larry was such a lad," they said; "no girl ought to have taken him seriously."

"Miss O'Shea is going to give Larry such a lovely present to-day, mother—a pair of Arab horses, and a double dogcart that she has had built in Long Acre. She has given a hundred apiece for the Arabs, and he will drive them tandem, and there will be no one in Dublin to touch him."

Doreen was the speaker, and she turned such a proud, happy face towards her mother that the latter felt a bit of real joy as she answered:

"My poor boy! it seems to me that Miss O'Shea is buying him."

"She is paying a handsome price, any way. Of course, Larry is Larry, and good enough to be the consort of a queen. But then, you see, mother dear, queens haven't come in his way, and Miss O'Shea and her thousands have. Be happy about Larry; his will be a path of roses."

Before Mrs. Tooney could answer her eloquent daughter a note was brought in.

"From Mr. Lawrence, ma'am, and there is no answer required," the servant said; and with a heart that stood still for a moment, and then nearly beat

out of her body, Mrs. Tooney opened the letter and read :

“ DEAREST MOTHER,

“ I am off to England by the next boat to find and marry Kathleen Devoran. When I have found her I shall bring her to you, and you, I know, will take her as your daughter. Until I find her you will not see your affectionate son,

“ LARRY TOONEY.”

His mother read the letter, then put a trembling hand up to a dazed brow.

“ Read it, all of you,” she said, passing the letter to the daughter who was nearest to her. “ Oh, Larry, Larry !”

The others were fluent on the subject. Mr. Tooney took a hard man-of-the-world view, and began conjecturing how this wild-goose chase after a slip of a girl would affect his official position.

“ If he was bent upon making an ass of himself, why didn't he do it by means of an advertisement ?” he asked ; and as no one answered that question, he asked another : “ Which of you will go and break it to Miss O'Shea ? I wash my hands of the business. To have such a fortune in the hollow of his hand, and to throw it away ! Most likely she will bring an action for breach of promise against him, and what will we all look like then, I wonder ?”

“ Ah, no, father ; she is not so unwomanly as that,” Doreen said hotly ; and then Larry's poor mother found her voice, and said :

“ I will go and confess my son's offense to Miss O'Shea.”

“ No, no, mother ! you can’t do it—you’re not strong enough ; you couldn’t stand the strain. It is father’s place to do it,” both girls exclaimed ; but their mother put down their opposition quietly and firmly.

“ I will go and bear the brunt for Larry,” she said. “ He is my own son, my own boy. If his mother does not stand by him, who will ? ”

There was no one to answer her. The father stormed and the sisters cried, and so she went out to fight the moral and social battle for her son alone and unaided.

Miss O’Shea had much on her side. She had wealth and the consciousness of right, and these are two powerful factors in a social struggle. On the other hand, Mrs. Tooney had motherly love, and very little else ; but motherly love was like a well-tempered sword to her, and she carried it and was prepared to wield it well when she arrived at Miss O’Shea’s handsome well-kept residence.

“ Have you heard of the present I’m going to give Larry this day ? ” the millionairess cried, bounding as she spoke into Mrs. Tooney’s arms. “ A pair of horses that will make all Dublin stare, and such a dog-cart ! ”

“ You are a kind, good, generous girl,” Mrs. Tooney said gravely, “ and your generosity will be severely taxed now and at once. Have you heard from Larry ? ”

“ I have a note from him somewhere. I haven’t opened it yet. Come out with me to the stable-yard, and see the new horses.”

“ Before we do that, dear, read Larry’s note.”

“ Oh, it’s probably only an excuse for not driving out with me to-day. Why don’t you seem more cheerful ? I bear with Larry’s neglect while all Dublin

is speaking of the way he slights me. Why can't you bear it, too?"

"He is my son, and I have a sorry truth to tell you about him."

"Tell it quickly."

"He has gone to find Kathleen Devoran."

Miss O'Shea waited a few moments before she spoke in answer to this; then she said:

"And when the honorable gentleman has found her, what more?"

"He will marry her."

"And I will wish him joy of his pauper bride. But now, look here, Mrs. Tooney: I have loved Larry; that's all over, but I like him as well. His wild-goose chase after the girl he really loves will be of no avail. But I will pay the best detectives in London to find her for him, and when they have found her he will realize what a woman's friendship is. There is only one thing in the whole miserable business that I lament, and that is that he didn't come and tell me all this himself. I would have been such a staunch friend to him! I am that now, but there would have been a little pleasure in the pain if he had trusted me."

"I can't defend my boy," said Mrs. Tooney; "all I can ask is that you will forgive him."

Miss O'Shea thought for a moment or two; then a comforting reflection came to her aid, and she said generously:

"Lord Tanton's brother proposed to me the week after Larry did. Lord Tanton has no children, and his brother is the heir-presumptive. I shouldn't wonder if I married him."

“To think of her taking up with Tanton’s brother after my boy !” the mother thought ; but she wisely held her tongue, while Miss O’Shea went on expatiating on the glory of the Tantons.

* * * * *

Larry Tooney started on his quest for Kathleen Devoran with very poor hopes of finding her. But it happened, as things often happen in real life, that he embarked on the same boat that had carried her across several days before.

The boat was a bit untidy, for they had been experiencing rough weather. As luck would have it, he was given the same state cabin in which Kathleen had passed a few miserable hours, and there he found a scrap of paper on which, in Kathleen’s handwriting, was Mr. Smither’s name and address.

This was enough for a lover and an Irishman.

Armed with it, he felt that he could face a thousand foes, and find her. But natural forces seemed to fight against him. Midway between Kingston and Holyhead they were befogged, and came into collision with a much bigger steamer. The boat Larry Tooney was on was so disabled that she had to slowly crawl back on the face of rather tempestuous waters to Kingston ; while he, in impotent rage, had to suffer and be still.

CHAPTER XXXII.

LARRY TRIUMPHS.

WHEN Mr. Lawrence Tooney reached London, he had a well-defined purpose in his mind. It was to find Kathleen Devoran, and persuade her to marry him at once. The little scrap of paper which he had found gave him the name only of Smithers, but there was no address. However, he remembered that his mother had told him that Kathleen had said she was going first to the lawyer who had advertised on behalf of the rich and kind lady who wanted to adopt a girl and be as a mother to her. Through the directory he knew that he could get the addresses of all the Smithers in London, however numerous they might be. Fortified by this knowledge, he became quite cheerful. The only depressing reflection he had, in fact, was that his "mother would have a tight time of it when she broke the news of his defection to Miss O'Shea." Which shows that, though Larry had very good knowledge of human nature, and was a fairly good judge of it, he had yet to learn that a woman may be plain and at the same time magnanimous.

True to this resolve, he went to a good hotel, where he was sure of finding the latest directory. His heart sank when he came upon Smithers, but none of them bearing the initials which he had found on the scrap of

paper. At last he turned a page, and there they were. "Practically I have found her now," he said to himself; and then he was able to enjoy the news and his dinner, neither of which had held any interest for him for some days.

Meantime, poor Kathleen, though she felt she had burnt her boats behind her, could not help feeling heart-sore at there being no effort made to find her. The Smithers were more than kind to her, and Mrs. Ogilvie, in the one interview she had had with that lady, had been motherly.

But for all this—and it was much in her friendless life—Kathleen could not forget Larry Tooney. Perhaps she clung to him, or, rather, to the memory of him, the more closely because she knew she had wronged another man for his sake. She had made a sacrifice for Larry, and a woman generally loves the one best for whom she has sacrificed something.

However, despite these saddening thoughts, Kathleen continued to extract a good deal of passing enjoyment from the novelty of the sights and amusements to which she was taken. The theaters, concerts, and the parks were the forms of change and gaiety which she preferred, and, like all of us with Irish blood in our veins, she had a deep-rooted and passionate love of all kinds of music and melody, both grave and gay, also of color and dramatic representations, and, it need scarcely be added, of horses. For London society, as seen at "at homes" and bazaars, she had no liking. Their ways were not hers, their habits were unknown to her, and so she felt an outsider among them. But if she could spend an hour in the morning in the Row watching the riders and horses, go to a concert in the afternoon, and to a

theater in the evening, she was quite content to dine alone when the Smithers were going out to dine, though most of their friends soon knew and invited the "pretty Miss Devoran," whose presence in their house soon increased Mrs. Smithers' social popularity.

At one of these concerts Dalma sang, and she was pointed out to Kathleen by Mrs. Smithers, who knew nothing of the girl's love-story.

"That is Mrs. Clifford, the sister of the lovely Miss St. Errol. Both sisters have lived romances. I'll tell you all about them one day."

"Why, she's as lovely as her sister," said Kathleen.

"Have *you* ever seen Miss St. Errol?"

"Yes, once, when I landed in England. It was just after my father's death, and I didn't think much about any one else at the time; but I saw she was lovely."

Mrs. Smithers, though she was a lawyer's wife, was not much given to putting two and two together. She had no suspicion of there being anything behind Kathleen's statement.

But when the concert was over and they were driving home she told Kathleen that "Mrs. Ogilvie had gone down to Errol Castle to stay with Miss St. Errol for a fortnight. When she comes back, she will be able to tell you much more about them than I can."

"And she will have heard much more about me than you can tell her," Kathleen thought a little nervously.

"Is it any use my begging you to go to this dinner to-night, my dear?"

Kathleen shook her head.

"None at all," she said; "besides, I have already refused through you."

"That is nothing. A note from Mrs. Daubeny this

morning tells me that she shall keep your place open to the last, and then if you *won't* go she will have one of her young daughters down."

"I would rather stay at home," Kathleen pleaded, and her plea was granted.

She had finished her little dinner alone, and was looking through some of the magazines and journals with which Mrs. Smithers' tables were lavishly strewn, when there came a sounding knock at the front-door which, for a moment, set her heart beating. Then she told herself that it could only be one of Mr. Smithers' clients, and went on reading.

But presently a name was brought to her that made her send the magazine flying to the other end of the room; and in a moment or two Larry Tooney's arms were round her, and he was calling her his "dear little wife that was to be."

They had a good deal to tell each other about the immediate past, and to ask each other about the future.

"I shall be afraid to go back to Dublin. I don't think I could face Miss O'Shea. And your people will break my heart if they look crossly at me for this."

"My mother and sisters will never look crossly at you; of that you may be sure. As for Miss O'Shea, I can't flatter myself it was a very deep-rooted affection. She will meet many a fellow she will like better in the course of a little time. Now, *you* never would."

"No, I never should," Kate said gravely, and she meant it.

"At the same time, I think it just as well that we should be married in London, and go back as man and wife to bear the brunt of the battle alone. I have no

doubt these kind friends of yours will let you stay with them till we can arrange it. And I'll get my mother and sisters over to the wedding."

"It does seem all so strange and sudden. I thought I had lost you forever only this morning, and now we are talking of being married. What a deceitful girl Mrs. Smithers will think me!"

He was on the brink of saying, "Never mind what any one thinks," but it struck him that might sound ungrateful to those who had befriended his darling while she was a maiden all forlorn, so he substituted the words, "I will tell them what you are—the dearest girl in the world, till you ran away from me. There must be no more of that, young lady."

"There shall not be, Larry," she said almost humbly; and Larry smiled the proud and happy smile of a conqueror in a proud and honorable field.

There was great rejoicing in the Smithers' establishment when Mr. and Mrs. Smithers came home from that dinner, to which Kathleen now felt she had "provisionally refused to go." But in feeling this she hardly did justice to the tenacity of her lover. If she had gone he would have followed her there, and set her mind and his own at rest before either of them slept that night.

"We shall have to find a new daughter for Mrs. Ogilvie, but we can never find one to come up to Stella and Kathleen," Mrs. Smithers said to her husband that night.

"And I don't think we'll try," he replied. "These surprises sprung on one, on one's own hearthstone, are rather startling to a man of my age and calling. For the next few days I shall live in dread of some of my

best clients coming in and telling me that they are not themselves but somebody else."

"How very strange! Now I have quite enjoyed this little episode," Mrs. Smithers said cheerfully; and she fell asleep while making active mental preparations for the wedding to take place from their house, for Larry had told her that he meant to be married in London.

"I should like to give her the trousseau," she told her husband, "but——"

"But the fact is, my dear, I expect you find you owe your dressmaker too much already to do that conveniently."

She laughed good-humoredly, like a woman does laugh who knows that her husband can and will come out with the needful cheques in time.

"It is not so much that as it is that I fear I might offend the proud little monkey. She has a little money and she thinks that little will go a long way."

Mr. Smithers murmured something to the effect of his "own money matters being quite enough for him to tackle," while his wife worried her heart with conjectures as to how she could best help the girl who had been thrown upon her care.

"But I'll have a talk with her about her trousseau to-morrow," she resolved, which she did, and to her astonishment she found that Kathleen's ideas were of rather a magnificent order.

"Your wedding must necessarily be a quiet one. Why not be married in your traveling-dress, and so save the expense of a smart dress with a train that you very likely won't want afterwards?"

"Larry says I must be all in white on my wedding-day."

"So you can be. There are lovely materials now for traveling-dresses."

"But I had an idea, and Larry liked it. It is white Irish poplin embroidered with silver shamrocks."

"How much money have you to spend, Kathleen?"

"Nearly two hundred pounds."

"And your wedding-dress will run away with at least fifty of that."

"Oh no!" Kathleen cried, aghast; but presently she added: "You will see how well I shall manage. Larry says it will be the best economy for me to get all my things from the best houses, so I shall go to Worth for three tailor-made dresses."

Mrs. Smithers drew a long breath.

"What is Mr. Tooney, and what is his income, may I ask?"

"I don't quite know. He is not City Treasurer. One of his sisters told me he was, but she made a mistake. But he has a very good civic appointment—I don't know exactly what it is—and a very good income—I don't know exactly what *that* is. But it doesn't much matter. Larry and I are prepared to face poverty and every other ill if we are only together."

Mrs. Smithers abstained from telling Kathleen that she had heard that sentiment before, and known it break down in a year under less heavy pressure than these young people were preparing for themselves.

Daily now were calls made upon the Smithers' servants to take in and carry up-stairs boxes from dressmakers, from milliners, from corset, boot, and glove makers, which arrived hourly; and Kathleen, in the joy of her heart at being the possessor of so many pretty things, would bring down armfuls of them to show to Larry.

Larry nearly always lunched with and frequently dined with them, so his opinion could be taken very often. He nearly always advised Kathleen to "get some more" of anything that had particularly struck him.

"I should like to be married by special license," Larry told Mrs. Smithers one day ; "but my mother seems to think it a needless extravagance, and I always defer to my mother."

"I think it would be so good if your mother came over at once," she said speciously.

She herself was quite tired of advising Kathleen, who turned an affectionate but disregarding ear to the advice when it did not meet her own views.

"Do you know, I think it would," Larry acquiesced heartily.

So he sent for his mother to come as soon as she could, and at once took lodgings for her and himself in Kensington.

Kathleen was rather frightened at the idea of meeting Larry's mother, as girls frequently are before they have married, especially when they know that the mother's heart has not been keenly set upon the union.

But her fright was as nothing to the terror which Mrs. Tooney felt when she discovered the amount of the bills Kathleen had run up.

This she did by going to all the shops at which Kate had ordered things, and requesting that the bills might be sent in at once to Mr. Smithers, the lawyer, with whom Miss Devoran was residing. When they came, she wrung her hands and bowed her head in despair, for they amounted to nearly eight hundred pounds !

"It's exorbitant, Larry ! Such extravagance must

be checked. I shall go to all these people who haven't made dresses to fit her yet, and make them take back their goods."

"Don't be harsh to her. She didn't know what she was doing."

"I won't be harsh, but for your sake and hers I must be firm."

She kept her promise, and was not harsh. But Kate wept and bemoaned herself so piteously that Larry was under the impression that his mother had not only been harsh, but cruel. The idea of parting with nearly all the pretty things that she had acquired with such pride, pleasure, and taste, made her miserable.

Larry, too, was useless to her at this juncture, for, as he was obliged to tell her, he could not possibly pay for the things at the time, but, if the people would consent to wait, he would undertake to do so in a couple of years. But to this his mother would by no means consent, and Kathleen had to be taught to set about getting her "things" in a far humbler way.

"Not one penny more than a hundred pounds must be spent on your wedding-outfit," Mrs. Tooney told Kathleen, who asked in bitterness :

"Am I not to have *any* thing pretty, then?"

"As pretty things as that money will buy," Mrs. Tooney told her.

And Kathleen bowed her head to inexorable fate in wo, not in resignation.

They were to be married the day before St. Patrick's Day in a quiet little church in West Kensington, and Mrs. Larry Tooney felt quite as happy, as she walked down the aisle on her husband's arm, in her neat, white-faced cloth dress and becoming little white toque, as if

she had been wearing the poplin embroidered with silver shamrocks for which her heart had pined.

They stayed in London till the next day, in order to see the Queen, greeted by myriads of thousands of her loyal people, when she passed through their midst, driving slowly, in order that they all might see the sovereign whom they all adore—the sovereign who has such sympathy with them.

It was a never-to-be-forgotten sight, with no state beside that of her own venerable majesty to gratify the yearning, shouting, cheering, loving, loyal multitudes. She wore the shamrock, which naturally increased the fervor, for English hearts rejoiced in the honor paid to Ireland.

Then Larry took his pretty, excited bride to see the Smithers before he took her over to Paris, and there they found Mrs. Ogilvie.

At first Kathleen was inclined to be prettily penitent about having disappointed the friend who had been so kind to her. But Mrs. Ogilvie soon nipped the penitence in the bud by saying :

“My dear, you came trusting to me as my daughter. I shall treat you while I live as one, and you will find I shall do the same after I die. I shall begin by inviting myself to your home in Dublin this summer—that is, if you are inclined to treat me as a mother.”

“You are mother and fairy-godmother in one,” Larry said gratefully.

He knew what an incalculable relief this renewal of her promise by the rich old lady would be to his poor little bride who had been so distressed by the imputation of extravagance, and also by the loss of her pretty things.

He also knew that Kathleen would get a warmer

welcome from his father if she went back to Dublin as the adopted child of a rich and kind woman than she would have had if she had gone back in the position of a snubbed and, perhaps, slighted daughter-in-law, who had tempted his son into making an impecunious marriage.

As for himself, he would have followed Kathleen all over the world, even if he had been sure that she would never have a penny. Nevertheless, the reflection that, as far as money could do it, her path would be smoothed for her was distinctly a pleasing one.

So they both started for Paris in buoyant spirits, like children, without a thought or care. The fairy god-mother put a purse in Kathleen's hand just as they were starting, which made the latter feel that she wouldn't change places with the Queen or Miss O'Shea, or any other royal or rich person of whom she had ever heard.

* * * * *

Down at Errol Castle things were not running quite so smoothly as the happy lovers could have wished.

Mr. Bircham was in that stage of convalescence when the patient is apt to fall into a state of irritability with every man around him, and intense pity for himself.

This special mood was upon him strongly the night Mrs. Clifford and Stanley came home.

Stella was so delighted at seeing them that she took it for granted that her father would be the same without taking his mood into consideration.

Accordingly, when the three young people went into the room where the still disabled man sat moping, they jarred upon his mood and nerves by what he considered their absurdly high flow of spirits.

He had been reminding himself for hours of those

lonely ten years at The Hulk, where his only friend had been his garden, his only companions his thoughts.

He had to be satisfied with that life ; he had, in fact, learnt to live it to a certain extent. Now he had been taken away from that existence, and had learnt to love his daughters. One of them wanted to leave him already, the other would be wanting to go soon ; then he would be more lonely than ever. It was hard, pitiably hard !

It was upon this mood that the three intruded with their happy, laughing voices, and faces full of love and youth and happiness. It seemed so callous of them when he was intensely miserable about something ; he was not quite sure what it was, but he knew that he was desperately miserable.

“Father,” Stella began, “isn’t it good to see Dalma and Mr. Stanley back again ? They have come to tell you the latest news.”

In reply to this he kissed his daughters, and gave Stanley a grim smile and a cool, stiff hand.

“What did Stanley mean,” he asked himself, “by running about with a woman who professed to be in love with another man, and that man his friend ?”

He gave them no encouragement to stay ; in fact, their presence obviously made him ill at ease. So Dalma, who was not acquainted with his moods yet, proposed that, as papa seemed tired, perhaps they had better go into the drawing-room, and wait until he had rested.

This they did, and then he felt bitterly hurt.

Presently Stella stole back to him.

“Father—dear, dear father,” she said, “why won’t you be happy with us, and let us be happy with you ?”

“ It’s my own fault ; but that doesn’t make it easier to bear,” he said sadly.

“ But what have you to bear that we can’t share with you ? ” she asked sweetly.

He shook his head, and would say nothing.

“ We all love you so,” she went on pleading. “ Why can’t you be happy in our love ? ”

“ Who is ‘ we all ’ ? ” he asked.

“ Dalma and St. Errol, and I and Guy Stanley.”

CHAPTER XXXIII.

“NOT MORE THAN OTHERS I DESERVE.”

THERE was silence for some moments, then Stella said :

“Guy Stanley wanted to tell you of—of our attachment, and to ask your permission for us to be engaged some time ago—before he went up to see St. Errol off. But you seemed so poorly, and were so upset about Dalma and St. Errol, that I wouldn’t let him say anything to you then.”

“Very considerate of Mr. Stanley and you,” he said coldly.

“Don’t take it in that way, dear father. Our husbands will do all they can to help Dalma and myself to make you happy, and make you feel that we are *all* your children.”

“I can’t think clearly here. I can never forget the fact that I am in the house of a descendant of that man who loved my wife, and took care of her when it was my place to do it.”

“Will you try to remember that he took care of me also, and that if he had not done so I should have been either a nameless foundling or a workhouse child.”

Stella’s spirit was rising desperately as she tried to

subdue it. Her words stung her father, and the sting aggravated his mood.

"I have always been in the wrong, and he has always been in the right," he said. "He had rank and wealth on his side. I had nothing but ill-luck, and so have always been in the wrong. And now my own child rises up, and twits me with my shortcomings. Well, well ! that's only natural ; she was brought up by Lord St. Errol."

Stella was staggered into silence for a few moments. Loyalty to the dead man who had been a true father to her fought with that other natural loyalty which made her long to find extenuating circumstances for this display of unreasonable ungenerosity which her real father was exhibiting. She found them presently.

"Dear father, I know you are distressing yourself because the doctors haven't worked a miracle, and enabled you to stand on that leg yet," she suggested ; and he grunted a less surly assent than he would have done had she tempered her speech with any remark as to the injustice of his last one.

He knew he had been unjust, and regretted it, but he was not going to betray either knowledge or regret yet. So he fell back for a time upon his leg.

"I have had awful twinges in it this morning," he said, looking at his daughter deprecatingly. "The pain would be a mere fleabite if I didn't feel that I've earned it in a remarkably undignified way, and that it's incapacitating me from looking after the place that represents my livelihood."

Stella turned away hastily to draw a blind up, or down, anything to conceal a happy smile. Then, when

the blind was adjusted to her liking, she came back to him.

"I have such a happy thought, father. You would like to go and see the dear old Hulk and the garden and that dreadful boy, wouldn't you?"

"It's impossible—impossible, I tell you! The carriage that was hung on the smoothest springs in the world, drawn by the steadiest-stepping horses, would jolt me, cause me excruciating pain, and retard my recovery—if I ever do recover," he added, relapsing into the "mood."

"So they might—so probably they would. No, I won't tell you one single word more, only this, you shall see The Hulk, and bring that boy to his bearings to-day."

The prospect of doing this was so pleasant to Mr. Bircham that he allowed his pillows to be adjusted more comfortably by Stella, and then partook of some light refreshment which Stella had arranged should arrive opportunely at that moment. When he looked up from the little invalid table appetizingly set by his side Stella was gone.

"I'm a miserable old hulk myself to make those two dear girls unhappy for a moment," he thought; and then, like a naughty, repentant child, he swore never to "do it again." He looked up at the portrait of his wife as he thought this, and a stray sunbeam fell on it at the moment, and made it smile upon him.

He was lapsing into thoughtfulness—not into the "mood"—when there came a rush of young life and laughter and blithe doghood into the room. Jock was the one to do reconnaissance work. He had been taught to "'ware the leg," so he approached the inva-

lid's couch cautiously but kindly. As soon, however, as Mr. Bircham had patted him on the head and called him “a good dog” (which, after all, was very inadequate praise for Jock), the intelligent four-footed comrade went on his wiry, springy little legs back by leaps and bounds to the other three, and gave them clearly to understand that they might advance with safety.

Almost before he knew what was happening Mr. Bircham saw a noiseless, well-cushioned lounge advance to his couch. The side of the lounge was let down, and he was slid into a comfortable position, his leg supported by a perfect rest, before he had time to resist or expostulate, or, indeed, realize what was being done. He only knew that his two daughters were dancing about him—that is to say, Stella was dancing about ; Mrs. Clifford was less exuberant in her demonstrations of pleasure—and that Mr. Stanley seemed to have taken command of the situation.

“Now, sir,” said the latter, “say the word, and we'll start for The Hulk.”

“Ready !” said the old sailor, and then, as he was wheeled swiftly through the library, he added : “But how am I to be got down those confounded terraces ?”

“We've arranged a gentle slope—at least, Guy has—covered with red baize, just as if you were Royalty,” Stella told him.

Then, before he had time to hint that he would like to have some physical weight in front of the chair when it should run away from Stanley's grip and overturn, as it surely would, he found himself at the bottom of the series of terraces in the broad avenue that led to the highroad.

“Now, Dalma will stay by your side and talk to you,

father, while I run back and pick up the pony-trap. She and I will drive, and Guy will wheel you."

In a moment Mr. Bircham's bristles were up.

"I won't stand it," he said. "I won't allow it. Mr. Stanley shall not turn himself into a bath-chair-man for me!"

"You sit still, sir, and leave Stanley to manage his own affairs, as he generally does," Stanley said laughingly, and after that things went very well with them. For Stella came up in her pony-trap, and the two girls drove at a walking pace till they came near to the front gate of the garden of The Hulk.

Of course, Mr. Bircham's daughters had not been cruel enough to take the little establishment unawares. As soon as they had matured their plans they sent off a man on horseback to tell the housekeeper to warn the boy of what was impending. There was no need to warn the housekeeper. She was always ready for any emergency. If you had roused her up at three o'clock in the morning she would have had hot buns and hotter coffee ready for you. But the boy—the poor little tatterdemalion who neglected all his duties as only a light-hearted, irresponsible young human being can—Stella's heart bled for him as she pictured him writhing under his master's searching glance. So, when they were nearing The Hulk she said :

"Father dear, Dalma and I will drive on and open the gate," and he assented cheerily to this proposition, being engaged in a debate, fierce on his side, with Stanley as to the respective merits of various branches of the two services and their respective commanders.

The gate was already open when the sisters reached it. The little gravel path that led up to the front-

door was so strikingly weedless that its glittering gravel almost made one blink. But what surpassed all understanding was the spotlessness, yet thoroughly “working,” appearance of the boy and his raiment. He had not donned his best clothes for the occasion ; he was far too clever a young diplomat for that. But he had put on some garments that had neither holes nor patches in them—garments that he had only been wont to wear when he had cleaned up for the day, and was sitting down to his tea in his mother’s cottage ; the suit in fact, in which he made night hideous in the village when he paraded it with his concertina—a ghastly instrument of torture which he fancied he could play. He had utilized all the means at his command as soon as he had received the note of warning. He had pressed every boy in the village who liked him, and every boy who was afraid of him, into his service, and while they weeded the path he washed himself and went in search of an attractive bundle of celery from a neighbor’s garden wherewith to greet his master. The vegetable garden he left to fate, or, rather, to the kindness of the “young lady from the castle,” for it was a gruesome sight.

They all played into his hands. Stanley declared he could not wheel the chair through such narrow paths. Then, while Mr. Bircham sat contentedly in his den, the sisters went out to pick primroses, and Stanley pressed his suit.

As might have been expected, there was an absolute and unconditional surrender on Mr. Bircham’s part, and they went back to the castle even more light-heartedly than they had left it.

But when they went in a cablegram was given to

Stanley which turned all their joy into mourning. Under the command of one of the finest reconnaissance officers in the army St. Errol and his fellow scouts had been lured into a Boer burrow, from the holes of which the enemy had emerged in their thousands, to face and destroy, if possible, a dozen who fought, and *were* men. The underground savages did not have it all their own way, however. Though two civilized fell done to death in that awful drift, the others escaped with their lives. St. Errol was among them, but he was dangerously wounded, and was being sent back to the base to die, or be sent home hopelessly invalided.

There was an awful silence for some time after Stanley had read this. Then he said :

“ I shall start at once to go to him.”

“ And I shall go with you,” Stella said, in a matter-of-fact, determined voice that no one thought of contradicting.

“ Where you go I go, dear,” Mrs. Clifford put in, clasping her sister closely to her heart. “ Yes, father, I mean it. There is no time for Stella and Guy to be married here, so I shall go as her chaperon, and they must be married in Cape Town, where, if I find St. Errol alive——”

“ You shall be married, too,” Stella and Stanley exclaimed simultaneously.

When they departed shortly after this, having taken what to him was a heart-breaking leave of Mr. Bircham, they could not have been recognized as the happy, laughing trio who had planned and carried out the little program of surprise in the morning. They were not lax or limp or in any way broken down ; they were

only all three of them—I mean all four of them, for Jock went with them—full of a concentrated, energetic purpose to get to him as soon and as able in themselves as possible.

This concentrated energy of purpose served Dalma and Stanley in good stead. But Stella had to fight a foe who was almost as nauseating as a Boer. The fiend of the sea struck her down as soon as they got into rough waters, and so she was lying there, a helpless, suffering mass of humanity, for many a long day while the ship steamed on.

During all that time Dalma watched by her sister unremittingly. Intense anxiety about the nature of the news which might meet them on their arrival in Table Bay saved her from the physical discomfort of the *mal de mer* under which poor Stella was laboring with a thoroughness which had characterized most of her proceedings through life. But beyond and outside this anxiety of her own, Dalma had a delicately difficult part to play.

There were times when Stanley demanded that he should be let see the girl he loved so well, the girl he had loved so long, the girl who was to be his wife as soon as she could possibly be made so after their arrival at their destination.

But Dalma defied these demands. She was not a worldly woman, but she was a thorough woman of the world. She had no intention of allowing her future brother-in-law to look upon his future bride while she was lying there sick, unkempt, and painfully unattractive in every way.

"If I were her husband already, you couldn't keep me away from her," he said to Mrs. Clifford one day

when both he and she were feeling remarkably well, and they were strolling on deck together.

“That’s it exactly, my dear Guy. If you were her husband already, you would have to face all the disagreeables of such a dreadful and prolonged attack as dear Stella is having. No one would pity you ; every one would take it for granted that, as you were her husband, so it was only just that you should bear half the ills that are betiding her. As it is, when our star shines out, I shall be glad to think that you have never seen its radiance dimmed for a moment. Now you know my meaning in the matter, and you know I am right.”

“She will think me cold and heartless again, as she had reason to think me so in the past,” he muttered.

“She won’t be such a goose. When she is able to hold her head up for a moment, I lay it on my arm and give her your messages. Then for a few moments she is happy, and then this wretched old liner gives a lurch, and she forgets everything but the sea-monster who has her in his clutches.”

“I ought not to have allowed her to come, my poor darling ! She is suffering all this for me,” Stanley almost moaned.

“Nonsense !” Mrs. Clifford said sharply ; “she is suffering all this because she is a bad sailor. Now, look here : don’t grizzle over this trifle. Think of what is before us ! Think of the heaped-up miseries that we may be called upon to witness before long. Think of the flower of our land called from every part of it lying mangled, dead, and dying, at the mercy of creatures who hoist flags of truce in order the more conveniently to shoot a brave and chivalrous enemy.

Think of the women and children—all of them dear to some one, as Stella is to you—fired upon and murdered by these unclean miscreants. And then, when you have thought, ask yourself why you should repine because Stella is seasick, and you are not allowed to see her.

He heard her in absolute silence ; but when she had finished, which she did with a pant, for she had talked fast and was out of breath, he took up her hand and kissed it. Then he went his way, wondering what would become of his brave little counselor if the news that met her when they reached Cape Town was worse than she anticipated.

As they drew nearer and nearer, it tested all Dalma's strength to keep up the courageous, unselfish front she had shown through all her life. The cup of happiness had been held so very near her lips. Surely it would not be dashed away at the last moment !

It was horrible to her to feel that it was a good thing for her that poor Stella still continued hopelessly, body-rendingly ill. If her whole time had not been taken up in ministering to her sister, her heart would have eaten its way through her body in its impatience to get to St. Errol. As it was, the daily round, the common task, nearly absorbed her.

* * * * *

They had reached the blessed haven of an hotel, where Stella had been put to bed—but not to rest yet, poor girl ! The awful physical experience she had undergone had taken such hold upon her that she kept on rocking herself in her bed, and then crying out piteously to Dalma to know, “When will it stop ? Oh, will it go on like this all the time ? Oh, how long will it last ? Will it always be like this ?” And so on

and on, till poor Dalma was almost distraught between her efforts to play the part of comforter and her yearning to be comforted.

Stanley had started for the hospital as soon as he had seen the ladies safely settled in their hotel. He was very prompt, but the time of his absence seemed endless to Dalma.

At last he came, and the speechless agony in Dalma's eyes and on her quivering lips made him say at once :

"He's not dead ; he has sailed to-day for England in a liner."

The long-drawn-out tension gave way at this. To say that Dalma "gave way" would be to inadequately express it. She seemed to crumble away down somewhere between a chair and the floor. Then it was Stanley's turn to play the part of tightener of unstrung nerves.

"Dalma," he said, "look up, *stand* up. You'll be better standing." He held out his hand, and she took it and raised herself to her feet. "Pull yourself together, dear," he said gently. "I told you he is *not* dead. If I had said that he *was* dead you could hardly have been more shattered."

"But—he is gone !" she moaned.

"Gone ! Gone to England, where Stella and you and I can follow him by the next steamer. Think what it would have been if we had been poor people, and had spent our all in coming out to him, and have had nothing left to take us back to him until I had worked to make it. We ought all of us to go down on our knees and thank God that is not our case. Through God's providence we have been given the means of doing exactly what we most wish to do. Think of the

hundreds of poor fellows who are in a worse case than our St. Errol." (At the sound of the familiar, well-loved name Jock sat up on his hind-legs, and offered a tremulous front-paw to each of them.) "Their wives and sweethearts haven't the means of coming to them; they must dree their weird alone. While as for the other hundreds of poor fellows who are sent home maimed, and halt, and suffering, *their* wives and sweethearts will have, in the majority of cases, precious little comfort to offer them. They're all equally deserving. 'Each one's been ready to do his work' as well as St. Errol, yet our case is fifty thousand times better than theirs. Now, how is my little girl? Let me see her."

"You shall, Guy; and I *will* pull myself together."

And she did. But her manner of doing this, quiet, undramatic as it was, made him feel that he was worse than a torturer of the Inquisition, in that it was *his* sway over her which was wringing her gentle heart into suppression and submission.

It was for her good, though, and through the whole of the voyage home he never ceased pointing out the superiority of their lot to that of others. And Dalma would force a smile and acquiesce, and then turn away to hide her tears on Jock's alert, intelligent head. He was only a dog, but what a dog, that little comrade true! The shiver that ran through his high-bred, sensitive little frame whenever she whispered to him that his master might be dying or dead gave her a strangely strong sense of his sympathy. So strong, in fact, was it, that when they did finally reach Errol Castle, and Jock ran in before them, she feared that he would presently run back and break "the worst" tidings to them.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

“ALL’S WELL.”

THE sufficient but still modest fortune which Mrs. Ogilvie had settled upon his son’s wife found small favor in the eyes of Mr. Tooney.

“When a man has nearly landed a salmon, he is not apt to be mighty well satisfied when he pulls in a sprat,” he said to his wife ; and Larry’s mother answered him :

“Larry will be happier with the sprat than he would have been with the salmon.”

“Look here, now : the thing is done, and can’t be undone ; but don’t you make Larry think that he has done a fine chivalrous thing in marrying a girl who can never lift him up beyond where he is now. The other one can raise and equip a regiment at her own expense, and that’s what I hear she is going to do. A *mounted* regiment, mind you, and she to supply horses and everything. Think what that means in these days ! If Larry had been her husband, he would have been made a baronet, for as likely as not he would have commanded it. Think of that, now ! You’ve aided and abetted in stopping your son fighting for his Queen and country.”

"He can still do that. He can volunteer to serve in the regiment Miss O'Shea is going to raise. He's a fine horseman and a fine shot, and I hope he'll do it."

"But he won't go in command. It's not likely she'll let him go in command, after the way he has served her, and it's in command I want to see him."

"Ah! I thought you only wanted to see him fight for his Queen and country. He can still do that."

Mr. Tooney thought for a few moments. Then, thinking it desirable to change the argument, as he was not getting the better of it, he said :

"Larry will have to put down his pair of horses. He'll have to run what he used to jeer at—a one-horse affair."

"He will not be so much worse off for his marriage as that would proclaim. He will have the same income he had before he married, and Kathleen will have two hundred and fifty pounds a year while Mrs. Ogilvie lives, and five hundred a year when she dies."

"What's five hundred a year? Miss O'Shea will spend more than that on the Court dress she'll wear when she's presented when the Queen—God bless her!—comes over. And think of the jewels she'll wear over and above the dress! And she with an uncle in America as rich as herself, with neither chick nor child! It makes me sick when I think of it. That's what it makes me—sick!"

"Then don't think of it, Mr. Tooney. You couldn't even give me a one-horse affair when you married me."

"Ah, but you've brought your children up to be much more extravagant than you were brought up by your mother to be. It's the fault of the age, this spirit—this spirit of extravagance."

"You must be glad that circumstances will compel Larry to exorcise this evil spirit."

Again Mr. Tooney changed his front.

"What a house their brother's would have been for the girls to be seen in if he had kept his word and married Miss O'Shea! As it is——"

"As it is, the girls will do very well, though they will not stand in the rays of reflected wealth," Mrs. Tooney answered, with some heat. "As you say," she went on, "what is done can't be undone, and as I am busy making preparations for the reception of Larry and his bride, we will not waste time in farther discussion."

"Preparations! What preparations?" Mr. Tooney asked.

"Such as are fitting for the reception of our son and his wife," Mrs. Tooney said; and then she escaped, leaving Mr. Tooney to have that recompensing thing—a row with himself.

It had been arranged between Mrs. Tooney and her son that the latter and his wife should come straight to the parental roof, and stay under it until a fitting abode could be found and furnished for the young couple. Hitherto Mrs. Tooney had never found it necessary nor thought it needful to consult her husband about her dealings with her children. He had given her a free hand, and she had used it.

But after this last recorded conversation with Mr. Tooney she began to wish that she had told him of the arrangements she had made. They included a dinner-party on the night of the arrival of the bride and bridegroom, and her heart misgave her. If Mr. Tooney had an attack of "hump" on the occasion, she knew that both Larry and Kathleen would resent it. Moreover,

the other guests would see it, and probably be amused at it, and they (the Tooneys) would be laughed at. There was not one among the coming guests of whom Mr. Tooney stood in awe. The situation promised to be a painful one for Larry's mother, but his sisters laughed at the prospect.

"We all know that father's bark is worse than his bite," Doreen said consolingly.

"But I don't want either barking or growling at the dinner. He may bark at me as much as he likes afterwards. But I want every one to go away and say, 'How proud the Tooneys are of their daughter-in-law!'"

"Ah yes! she's a nice little thing enough, and I hope Larry will rest contented with her. But this is a big thing Miss O'Shea is going to do, mother—raise a mounted troop at her own expense. Larry will kindle to that."

"No doubt he will have the option of serving with it. Miss O'Shea won't reject him. I'm sure, though he will be able to take his own charger and equip himself."

"Ah yes, mother. But if he had married her he would have had command. Think of that, now! As it is——"

Doreen paused, and her mother asked:

"Think of what?"

"Why, that now some one else will have command—some one who will not only have command of the troop, but of Miss O'Shea and her money into the bargain."

"And that is—Lord Tandon's brother, I suppose."

"No, it's not," Doreen laughed out. "I know, but I won't tell."

"It's little I care who it is, since it's not my own

boy," Mrs. Tooney said, with proud indifference. But she did wish to know.

* * * * *

When Jock came back to meet the rest of the party as they made their way rapidly through the long corridors to the room occupied by Lord St. Errol, it was evident that the little dog was in lowered, but not utterly downcast, spirits. With the unerring instinct of his kind, Jock had made his way straight to his master's door, at which he had scratched with vigor. St. Errol had heard and recognized the scratch, but he was too weak to do more than smile and say feebly, "Let him in." The tones were so low in which these words were spoken that the nurses did not quite catch them, and when one nurse did eventually open the door, she told the servant in waiting in the anteroom to "Pick up that dog and shut him up somewhere. He has been disturbing Lord St. Errol."

"It's his lordship's own pet dog, sister. It's more than my place is worth to keep him from his master," the man stammered out.

"Shut him up as I tell you," the sister said, with a serene smile.

So Jock was captured, but not shut up. On the contrary, he was let loose to meet his other friends.

"He must be ill indeed ; they have kept Jock from him," Dalma was moaning, when they heard sounds behind them which made them look round to see Mr. Bircham hobbling after them on crutches.

"Stop, my children," he said coolly. "I'll welcome you back properly when I've paved the way for you to see St. Errol. I'm with him constantly. I don't agitate him. Don't cry, Dalma dear. All he has to fight

now is weakness, and the sight of you will reinforce his strength."

Then, with a word to Stanley to "come with him," he hobbled on, and the two women were left in the corridor alone, for Jock had gone on with the men with the firm intention of slipping in to his master under cover of Stanley's heels.

There was a meeting shortly which obliterated all memory from St. Errol's mind of the terrible campaign through which he had passed, and Dalma's sad experiences retired into the limbo of forgotten things. They came to a full understanding in the course of a minute without hesitancy and without false shame in the presence of the others. Dalma went up to the side of the bed, knelt down and put her arms round his neck, and he said as clearly and loudly as he could :

"This is what I dreamt of when you came down-stairs that day in the lodgings and called Jock."

"We'll spend at least one day of the honeymoon in the old lodgings, won't we?" Dalma said.

"And we'll spend the day with you, won't we, Guy?" Stella put in.

"Our orders from the doctors are that Lord St. Errol is not to be agitated or fatigued," one of the nursing sisters murmured to Mrs. Clifford; so, after a whispered assurance to St. Errol that she "would come again soon," Dalma and the others withdrew, and St. Errol fell into the most refreshing sleep he had known since he was wounded.

* * * * *

That night the two sisters sat together in Mrs. Clifford's dressing-room. In the midst of the agony and lassitude which had been his portion when he came

home, St. Errol had thought of everything that could exalt and do her honor in the eyes and estimation of those about her. The suite of magnificent apartments which had been known as the Royal Rooms since the memorable occasion when King William IV. and his consort, Queen Adelaide, had occupied them were thrown open and fittingly set in order for the future mistress of the castle. The furniture was somewhat heavy and overrich, and Dalma would have been more comfortable in less regal rooms. But it was St. Errol's wish that she should be the first to occupy them after those long-passed-away royal guests who had honored the Lord St. Errol of that day with their presence. The mother of the present housekeeper had been housekeeper at Errol Castle in those days, and it was a tradition in the household that everything was to be kept as the King and Queen had left it. Weekly dustings and monthly turnings-out had kept the old-world furniture and trappings fresh and clean. But everything was too magnificent, too richly ponderous, to please the taste of either girl.

"I often used to come in here and long to take that Honiton lace bed-cover off its crimson silk lining," Stella told her sister.

"I wonder you didn't do it; it would look lovely draped over a white satin dress."

Stella laughed.

"You forget I had no white satin dresses in those days, and never went anywhere to wear one. What shall you do with the Royal Rooms and all they contain when you're married, Dalma?"

Dalma went to the door which opened into the drawing-room. The whole suite of apartments were well

lighted up, and together the two girls looked up at the lofty vaulted roof and away to the further end of the grandly proportioned long room.

"There is no music-room in the castle. If St. Errol will let me, I should like to make this one," Dalma said at length. "I will take out a license and give concerts here for the benefit of the thousands of poor fellows who will come home maimed and halt and helpless from this awful war."

Stella looked admiringly at her sister.

"And you'll be able to get down all the swell, successful singers, because you'll be able to pay them well," she said.

"I shall not try to get the swell, successful ones; they can do without me. I shall get those who are situated as I was—those who ought to be successful, and haven't the money and interest to bring them to the fore. I hope my concerts may be the means of bringing peace and plenty to many a weary heart and body besides our dear soldiers."

"And I'll build a little theater at Rose-in-Vale, and take out a license, and do my small best to help struggling actresses and actors," Stella cried enthusiastically.

Then, filled with these Utopian schemes, the sisters said good night to each other and parted.

"It is good to be rich and powerful. One can avert such a lot of misery from other people who are less well off, and quite as deserving and clever and cultured as one's self, only less lucky," Dalma thought, after lying awake for hours maturing her scheme.

Then, with a little gulping sigh quickly swallowed by a smile, she recalled the days in the old lodgings where she had first seen St. Errol, where she had often had to

decide whether she would go without a chop for her dinner, or give up the idea of a hansom which would take her in good time to fulfil a hardly-gained engagement.

One must be behind the scenes of a real artist's life to realize the continual sacrifices that are made in order that the eye of the public may be gratified by the appearance, as well as its ear by the voice, of the sweet singer who has gone dinnerless in order that she may arrive on the scene of action unheated, unflustered, speckless and smart at every point.

* * * * *

The day of Larry's return, a married man, to the home-quarters was at hand, and his mother was at the end of her patience and her wits. Her husband had told her one morning that he would have variation made in the ordinary routine family dinner on the night of Mr. and Mrs. Larry's arrival. Then she had to tell him of the projected dinner-party, and he instantly registered a vow that not a drop of champagne should flow from his cellar at it.

"May I ask whom you have invited to come and make merry at our disappointment and expense?" he asked.

She told him "only old family friends—people who had known Larry all his life."

Mr. Tooney tried hard to gulp down his rage, mortification, and disappointment. He had been born ambitious. As a baby he had howled himself black in the face because another baby held a better bedizened rattle than had been given into his infant clutches. Ambition had made him plod and become a substantial, well-to-do man among a group of well-to-do, substan-

tial men. But it had not lifted him above them ; it had not made the respectable name of Tooney to ring in the land ; it had not brought him a baronetcy, or even knighthood—honors which lesser men had obtained because they had made good beer or buttons, or some other stuff to the making of which he had never applied his brains. But when Larry grew up his father merged all his self-pride in his son. Larry, with his quick brain and physical masculine beauty—Larry, with his dulcet tongue and "air to the manner born"—would mark an epoch, his father felt sure, in Ireland's social history. And now Larry had thrown away a millionairess and his chances—had wedded a comparative pauper, and would have to show before Dublin in a "one-horse affair."

No wonder that his father was sore as he ran through the roll of what Larry might have been had it not been for his pernicious perversity.

* * * * *

Doreen Tooney and Miss O'Shea had continued their friendly relations just as though Larry had never existed. There was no false sentiment about Miss O'Shea, and no maudlin sympathy about Doreen ; therefore the two girls got on well together. It was to Miss O'Shea that Doreen carried her home troubles in *re* the return of the Larrys, and the dinner-party in their honor.

"I don't mind about them a bit," Doreen said frankly. "Larry will laugh everything off, and stand between Kathleen and any slight. But it's the mother I'm thinking of—the poor mother. She wants to be so happy when she greets her boy, and she'll just be a rag—a miserable, unhappy rag."

"Why?" Miss O'Shea asked.

"You may well ask why. Just because father will damp us all down and iron us out flat."

"He'll be ashamed to show temper before his guests."

"Not he. Larry's all the world to him; and if he's angry with Larry, he will think little of the whole world knowing it. Poor dad! I'm sorry for him, too. He looked to Larry to make such a name and place for himself; and now that's over."

"There is no need for it to be over. He has a wife who will spur him on, I think. Doreen, do you think it's too late for your mother to invite me to the welcoming dinner?"

"Not a bit. But you wouldn't come?"

"But I would, and I will. And, what's more, if your mother will invite Lord Tandon he will come too."

"No!"

"Yes."

"But, dear, we don't know Lord Tandon," Doreen argued.

"Leave that to me. You shall know him this very day. Ask your mother to come to tea with me to-day at five, and I'll introduce Tandon to her. He's going to marry me—I hadn't told you that yet—and we'll both come and help to welcome Larry and his bride."

The program was carried out exactly as Miss O'Shea proposed, and her action to a certain extent muzzled Mr. Tooney—before strangers. But to his wife and family he expressed himself freely.

"She's a fine, noble girl, is Miss O'Shea, and Tandon's a lucky man to have caught her in the rebound.

I hope you'll be satisfied, when you see them, with what you've done to spoil Larry's chances. I hope he'll feel and look ashamed of himself."

"If he did you wouldn't own him, father."

"Tandon can't hold a candle to him for looks," Mr. Tooney muttered, finding some poor solace in uttering depreciatory words of his son's rival.

"Who can?" Mrs. Tooney asked proudly; and then the daughters laughed at them both for their exaggerated pride in Larry, and so harmony was restored.

* * * * *

"I am sure of your mother and sisters,—they'll be kind and sweet, I know; but I am afraid of your father, and simply terrified at the idea of meeting Miss O'Shea by-and-by. Do you think she will set the whole neighborhood against me?"

Larry puffed leisurely at a cigarette before he answered. He knew nothing of the home troubles, and had almost forgotten Miss O'Shea.

"I should think not—I mean, of course not. By the way, I had almost forgotten that I am to ride her horse at the point-to-point races next week. I suppose that engagement won't be "off," though the other is."

"How can you speak so coolly about it, Larry?"

"Because I think I know Miss O'Shea better than any one of the others do. She's a fine-natured girl, without a bit of vindictiveness in her, and with a great regard for pluck. If I went about with a hang-dog look she'd despise me. But as I shall hold up my head and face her like a man, she'll treat me as one."

"How *could* you give her up, thinking highly of her as you do; Kathleen asked almost jealously.

But she put jealousy aside after the home-coming

dinner, and accepted Miss O'Shea's invitation to be the first guests she and Tandon received after their honeymoon.

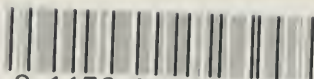
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Neither of the two sisters would consent to be made happy before the other one ; so the two couples were married by special license on the same day. Mr. and Mrs. Stanley went away for a brief honeymoon. Lord and Lady St. Errol perforce remained at Errol Castle until such time as he could be conveyed to the seaside with safety.

Jock was very happy, but he felt sometimes that it would have been more satisfactory if he could have kept all four of them under his eye. However, he is a sensible dog, and quite understands that they will soon all be reunited.

THE END.

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